

Problematizing language and revitalization:


Why language documentation hits a wall in revitalization

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Introduction


- We commonly talk and think about LD&R as a set of research activities
- However, extending research from LD and LR is not straightforward
- This is because LD & LR tend to involve different ways of thinking about language



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Introduction


- I went through this shift through a repeated process hitting a wall and struggling to find my way out
- This struggle seems to be common



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Goal


- Reflect on the problems/frustrations LD researchers tend to experience as they move into LR
- Learn from the problems/frustrations to reframe our thinking about language so that we can approach revitalization research better



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Disclaimer


* This talk is based on my personal reflection as I transitioned myself from description, documentation, and to revitalization research, and is not a systematic scientific study. It is just an invitation for your own reflection.



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My background

- Research strongly focused on grammar:
 - Descriptive and documentation study of Nuuchahnulth (Canada) and Miyako (Okinawa, Japan)
 - Typological study of morphosyntax
 - Language use and grammar
- Started working recently on LR



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Two approaches to language

- Language as form
 - what the form is; how to build formal structure
- Language as practice
 - what and how you do things with language



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Form-centric approach to language

- Focused on the formal aspect of language
- Tends to think about language independent of the socio-cultural environment in which it is embedded (disembodied view)
- Grammatical research tends to encourage the form-centric view of language



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Practice-centric approach to language

- Focused on practice (actual use)
- Think about language within socio-cultural contexts, motivations and needs
- Sociolinguistic and anthropological research tend to encourage the practice-centric view



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Approaches to language and LD

- Form-centric approach goes well with LD
- LD can encourage the form-centric approach



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My experience of going through LD&R



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Language documentation

- Creates good comprehensive records of a language and its linguistic practices
- Strong emphasis on creating and make available the primary data: comprehensive, authentic, accessible, multipurpose, and lasting



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Language documentation

- Important feature:
 - attention to use -- for what and how the data is used
 - sensitive to the community's needs -- revitalization
- LD tries to respond to the community needs for revitalization



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Language revitalization

- Bring the traditional language back in active use in everyday life of the community



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LD feeds LR

- **Documentation** research creates records and materials that would help community **revitalize** (strengthen/regain) their traditional language and culture
- Good documentation
> Good revitalization



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But we often hit the wall...

- Good quality data are not appreciated
- The community don't seem to be interested in their traditional language or culture
- Language revitalization gets lost among all other pressing issues and problems in everyday lives: 'we are too busy ...'
- etc. etc.



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The wall

- The problems are interfering with effective documentation & revitalization research
- The problems are common
- Maybe the problems are systematic --



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Sources of the problems

- Often considered as a problem with the community or the world
 - No good speakers left in the community?
 - They don't care?
 - They are not ready?
 - They are too distracted or busy?
- But is it really just about the community or the world?



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Could we be part of the problem?

- Reflective questions
 - Is there any possibility that our way of doing research is aggravating the problem?
 - Is there a possibility that the wall we hit is created by the way we do LD?
- Why do we want to reflect on ourselves?
 - We cannot solve the problems just by blaming on the community or the world



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The wall — reframed

- Difficulties caused by misalignment between:
 - what we expect and how we do things in **documentation**
 - and how revitalization happens and how language is in the context of **revitalization**



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Wall of the reality of language



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'Good language data' in LD

- good data = 'authentic' data
- What is 'authentic'?
- Kind of language the form-centric researchers tend to think 'authentic':
 - traditional, old, archaic
 - 'pure': without mixing
 - unique, distinctive



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Traditional, old, archaic forms are better



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Preference for the old and archaic

- Frustrations
 - Old forms are good!
- BUT
 - Old forms seem to be more controversial
 - The 'correct' form/function is hard to determine
 - The community can become divided about old forms



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The old and archaic: tricky issues

- Old forms can carry negative experience/prestige
- Young people don't have emotional connections with old forms
- Knowledge disparity can introduce antagonism between generations
 - Old: criticize the young for their lack of knowledge
 - Young: resent being criticized



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The old and archaic in revitalization

- Too much focus on the old and archaic is not always effective in revitalization
 - Insistence on the exact form can exclude people from the process of renewal of the tradition
- Things to think about:
 - Are the old and traditional forms dividing people or connecting people?
 - Do they create criticisms and resentment, or motivations for learning?



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Language without mixing
is better



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Preference for pure language

- Frustration
 - We want pure language data!
- BUT
- Everyday language use contains frequent mixing of languages
 - Speakers who don't mix languages are hard to find



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Pure language: tricky issues

- Code switching is very common
 - -- in that sense, they form a natural part of the use of the language
 - We never stick to a single variety of language in our everyday life anyway
 - A large portion of switching occurs as shifts in registers
 - e.g. Miyako: Miyako as informal register vs. Japanese as formal register
- Code switching is part of a 'socio-cultural art' of the language



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What's wrong with code switching?


- Why do form-centric researchers want to exclude code switching?
 - maybe because accepting code switching as part of the language would complicate its analysis and understanding of the grammatical system



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Things to think about for revitalization

- Code switching is a communicative practice
- Where should we place code switching within the communicative style of the people?



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Wall of the reality of the community



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What are good recordings



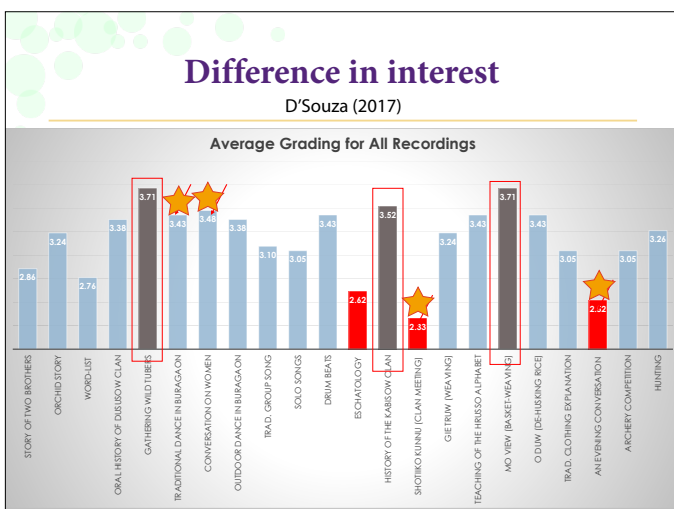
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Good valuable records

- Frustration
 - We made good, high-quality recordings BUT
 - The community members don't seem to like them



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Reasons for disliking recordings

Native Speaker Perspective	Researcher Perspective
Event not performed according to tradition	Bad recording quality
Mundane and uninteresting	Linguistically uninteresting
Violence towards animals	Items that look like staged events
Political overtones	Noisy background



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Good recordings: tricky issues

- The way the community members evaluate the quality and value of the recordings is different from the way LD researchers do
 - Researchers tend to see recordings as pieces of video recordings and to focus on limited aspects of (e.g. linguistic) performance
 - Community members tend to view this as social events and cultural performances



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Things to think about for revitalization

- Community members and researchers look at the recordings with a different set socio-cultural expectations
- How can we ensure the documentation we create fit the community's expectations and needs?



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What do we revitalize in LR?



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Interest in language

- Frustrations
 - The community members seem to have hard time directing their attention to language
 - It is difficult to convey why the loss of a language is a serious problem



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Interest in language: tricky issues

- It is difficult for the community members to grasp what language is
- We tend to have a very impoverished view of language in the form-centric research
- The value of a language is easier to understand in relation to particular activities/domains:
e.g. well-being of the elders



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Things to think about for revitalization

- Language/culture do not exist as objects to be preserved or passed on
- They can only be maintained and transmitted in connection to specific practices or activities
- We cannot directly revive a language/culture; what we need to revive is domains of use



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Why do we want to revitalize the language?



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Value of the language

- Frustration
 - The community members don't see any value in their language
 - The community members have low opinion about their language



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Value of the language: tricky issues

People stop using their language for two major reasons:

- Association with pain
 - Language can be a very painful reminder of stigma, discrimination, etc.
 - Bringing back the old language/culture does not automatically bring happiness
- Disconnection from the real life
 - The traditional linguistic/cultural wisdom has lost connection with the real-world needs of the people



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Things to think about for revitalization

- Both of the problems (pain and disconnection) need to be addressed to re-establish the value of the traditional language within the community
- To address the pain: we need to restore positive values, social prestige and positive emotions about the language
- To address the disconnection: we need to make the traditional language relevant to addressing the needs in everyday life



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Participation in LD&R



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Community participation

- Frustration
 - Difficult to involve community members, especially those from younger generation, in documentation/revitalization activities



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Community participation: tricky issues

- Motivation for participation is shaped in the complex of surrounding situations/emotions
 - jealousy
 - exclusion
 - infighting
- Especially tricky is exclusion inherent in the traditional restoration model of revitalization



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Community participation: tricky issues

- Restoration model
 - Put emphasis on bringing back the old tradition
 - Emphasis on inclusion on the elders but possible exclusion of the youth in the process of building revitalization activities



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Things to think about for revitalization

- Participation cannot happen without inclusion
- Revitalization is about the future
- Who should be the central participants?



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Summary



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Bias shaped by the form-centric view

- Objectifying language
 - Language can be extracted, collected, preserved, and passed on as such
- Form-centric view of revitalization
 - language loss is caused by loss of forms
 - language can be revitalized by creating records and materials and teaching the forms



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Reality of revitalization

- Revitalization is not simply about bringing back the form of the language
 - Forms are important as a visible symbol of the community connection/unity
- Revitalization is more about bringing the language back into people's lives and back in connection with people's dignity, pride, and identity



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The wall

- We could run into many walls in LR work if we are not conscious about our form-bias that we carry over from our LD work
- It is important for us to reflect on our view and assumptions, especially when we run into difficulties



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References

- Vijay D'Souza. 2017. "Communities, texts and context: Maximizing impact through culturally-aware language documentation." Paper presented at *the Second Documentary Linguistics -- Asian Perspectives*. May 25-27, 2017. Hong Kong University.



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