

Young speakers of indigenous languages

Key words:

language endangerment, indigenous languages, revitalization, young speakers, language change

Workshop description

According to recent estimates, over 40 percent of the world's languages currently face endangerment (see <https://endangeredlanguages.com/about/>), especially indigenous languages in different parts of the world. Without intervention, approximately one language a month will stop being spoken in the next 40 years (Bromham et al. 2022). This typically happens when a language is not being learnt by children as their first language, or it is gradually being replaced by another language, which becomes the dominant one for the younger generation. In some cases, as a result, the language falls into almost complete dormancy after several decades. In other cases, language communities and linguists undertake revitalization efforts that encourage particularly the younger speakers to reclaim the language and support the intergenerational transmission.

Language revitalization, however, encompasses an important paradox. While it aims at re-establishing the language in the speech community, in doing so, it often causes at least partial changes in the structure of the language. The language production of the people who have not previously used a minority language will differ from the traditional competence. In our workshop, we would like to focus on the peculiarities that the speech of these people might show, and on the methods that allow to best document, describe, and analyse their speech.

In terms of structure, more is known about the speech of people losing the minority language, the so-called 'semi-speakers' (Dorian 1982; Grinevald & Bert 2011). However, the documentation and revitalization of a language can start at varying stages of the language shift, and often it deals primarily with bilingual speakers whose competence was very different to begin with. Many language activists are 'new speakers', who did not acquire the minority language from the family and learn it intendedly. Importantly, the non-family transmission among new speakers does not prevent them from acquiring fluency, choosing the minority language as their preferred medium of daily communication, or raising their children as bilingual (see, e.g., O'Rourke & Nandi 2019 on the Galician parents' community).

Although there have been many works on 'new speakers' in recent years (O'Rourke et al. 2015; Smith-Christmas et al. 2018), they deal primarily with attitudes to language and other sociolinguistic issues but have little to do with linguistic analysis (though see Rodríguez-Ordóñez 2021). At the moment some features seem to be properties of the speech of the young, for example non-standard word order in Kalmyk (Baranova 2023), but it is possible that these features may be consolidated in the future. It can lead to structural changes in the minority language: for example, the revived Cornish has a new form to express possession with abstract nouns that differs from traditional Cornish (Arbes 2019).

Naturally, among young speakers of indigenous languages facing endangerment children are a special case. The study of their linguistic competence is interesting from a variety of aspects, including the ways they speak, the strategies they use, and the ways they acquire their language(s), but also the methods with which these issues can be addressed. Since there is no widely accepted methodology for gathering child speech and child-directed speech, many documentation projects either completely exclude working with children or include non-systematic occasional cases of child speech recordings (see Eisenbeiss 2005; Hellwig & Jung 2020). On the other hand, the speech of child speakers of indigenous languages and the child-directed speech are extremely valuable, as they are among the components that are vital for understanding the functioning of a language, and the respective materials can be helpful for revitalization efforts.

The topics that we plan to discuss at the workshop include but are not limited to the following:

- Structural peculiarities in the speech of young speakers of indigenous languages, possibly in connection with the sociolinguistic status of the language;
- The role of new speakers and language revitalization in language change;
- The speech of child speakers of indigenous languages;
- The methodology for documenting the speech of young indigenous speakers, child speech, and child-directed speech.

Call for papers

Preliminary abstracts of no more than 300 words (excluding references) in .doc, .docx, .rtf or .odt format should be sent before November 13, 2023, to the workshop organizers:

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Any questions or suggestions regarding the workshop are very welcome as well.

If the workshop is accepted, it will take place at the 57th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea in Helsinki, 21–24 August 2024 (for more information on the conference see <https://societaslinguistica.eu/sle2024/>). All preliminary workshop participants will be invited to submit their full abstracts before January 15, 2024.

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