

International Symposium

“Language maintenance and revitalization across the world”

2nd June 2023

Venue: Lipsius 2.27, Cleveringaplaats 1, 2311 BD Leiden

Background: There is a growing awareness of the global shrinking linguistic diversity. There is also a growing realization that languages are part of sustainable quality of life and the holistic wellbeing of individuals and communities. Yet there is continued threat to the vitality of several languages through language shift and break in intergenerational transmission of languages. The UN has instituted the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022-2032) in order to “draw global attention on the critical situation of many indigenous languages and to mobilize stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitalization and promotion” (<https://www.unesco.org/en/decades/indigenous-languages>). Across the world individuals and communities engage in activities and practices to promote the continued use of signed and spoken languages in various domains. The symposium is a forum for researchers to reflect on practices of language maintenance and/or revitalization and reclamation in different regions of the world including Europe, Australia, Brazil, East Africa, West Africa and Siberia.

Programme:

09.30 - 09.50 Walk-in tea and Coffee

09.50 – 10.00 *Felix K. Ameka*: Welcome and Introduction

10.00 - 11.00 *Anne Pauwels*: Maintaining linguistic diversity in the 21st century:
Challenges and opportunities

11.00 -12.00 *Miguel Oliveira Jr*: Documentation of Yaathe, the endangered language
of the Fulni-ô people

12.00 – 13.00 *Natalia Aralova*: Ongoing language shift in Siberia: what is being done
for the maintenance of the indigenous languages

13.00 – 14.00 Lunch

14.00 – 14.45 *Andrej Shluinsky*: An orthographical standard for an endangered language:
experience of Forest Enets

14.45- 15.30 *Sara Petrollino*: Child agency and horizontal learning in language maintenance
practices: insights on the acquisition of linguacultural norms
among the Hamar of South West Ethiopia.

15.30 – 15.45 Tea Break

15.45 – 16.30 *Victoria Nyst*: Sign language vitality & vitalization: an introduction

16.30 - 17.15 *Shane Gilchrist* Language maintenance in deaf education: sign language
revitalisation after a century of oralism:
Colombia as a case study

17.15 – 18.00 General Discussion

Abstracts:

Maintaining linguistic diversity in the 21st century: Challenges and opportunities

Anne Pauwels, SOAS, University of London and University of Melbourne

The International Decade of Indigenous Languages not only helps to highlight the plight of many languages threatened by extinction but also to draw attention to the complexities around linguistic diversity in the world. There is no doubt that linguistic diversity, as measured in terms of the number of languages used around the world, is rapidly diminishing. Yet, the presence of multiple languages spoken or heard in many (mainly urban) regions is in fact growing. This is especially the case in those regions and countries 'governed' by a monolingual linguistic ideology. While 'indigenous' languages only make up a small part of this linguistic diversity, they nevertheless contribute to this multilingual palette in urban areas. Thus, in the 21st century we are faced with a situation of both decreasing and increasing linguistic diversity. This poses challenges for both researchers and policy makers: how to investigate and manage these 'conflicting' trends when there is a desire to maintain linguistic diversity. In this presentation I put the spotlight on the research side by reviewing how linguistic diversity and language maintenance/revitalisation have been studied in the past. The increased specialisation of this field of study has been of benefit to understanding the specific challenges faced by languages depending on their vitality. Yet, such specialisation has also led to limited cross-fertilisation across the groups/categories in terms of maintenance or revitalisation. Given the complexity of linguistic diversity and the urgency surrounding the survival of many languages, it is worthwhile to explore new ideas, approaches and methods that build upon the insights of formerly separated fields of study in the pursuit of maintaining or revitalising languages.

Documentation of Yaathe, the endangered language of the Fulni-ô people

Miguel Oliveira Jr

This presentation will provide an overview of the ongoing efforts to document Yaathe, the language of the Fulni-ô people. Yaathe is currently the only indigenous language still spoken in the vast Nordeste region and is classified as "severely endangered" by UNESCO. This language holds great cultural and linguistic significance due to its unique characteristics, as it does not appear to be related to any other known language. The audience will learn about the challenges faced by linguists and community members involved in documenting Yaathe, as well as the potential benefits of preserving this language for future generations

Ongoing language shift in Siberia: what is being done for the maintenance of the indigenous languages

Natalia Aralova, Kiel University & Münster University

For the most part, the languages of Siberia are in a disconcerting situation. For several dozens of languages belonging to different families intergenerational transmission is interrupted to various degrees. Although the language shifts generally seem to be irreversible, it is still worthwhile considering what might be done to improve the situation. I will give an overview of language maintenance efforts and then go on to specifically address the current challenges faced by the Center of preservation, revitalization and documentation of languages of Russia, which was formed in 2021.

Among other activities, the Center has supported the involvement and training of language activists, language documentation with a focus on revitalization (in the spirit of Amery 2009 and Austin 2021), and the introduction of the Master-Apprentice practice in several communities.

An orthographical standard for an endangered language: experience of Forest Enets

Andrey Shluinsky

In my presentation, I will share my experience of a linguist's help to an endangered linguistic community in standardizing orthography. Following the most optimistic estimate, Forest Enets (<Samoyedic <Uralic; Tajmyr peninsula, Siberia / North Asia) has no more than three dozens of full-fledged speakers, and the language is not used on everyday basis for about twenty years. Still, revitalization initiatives have existed for this language during a decade, and some of this effort is traditionally directed at making community oriented linguistic resources, such as a primer, a phrasebook, a picture dictionary or a text collection. While there is no short orthographic tradition for Forest Enets, language community members involved in writing have been using Cyrillic script spontaneously applying it to Forest Enets phonology, and importantly, any writer has acquired their own graphical habit and at the same time is not at all consistent. Several years ago, an initiative of creating orthographical conventions arose, which turned out to be a hard task, as at the same time writers were not prone to give up their graphical habits. Achieving a compromise in graphical conventions turned out to be possible due to the following methodological solutions.

First, orthographical conventions are positioned as recommendations, not as strict rules. The key point was not to discourage anyone from using the language in its written form.

Second, practical simplicity of the orthographical standard has a priority on its phonological precision. While phonological ambiguity was avoided when possible, it was still considered a lesser evil than a system too complicated for its users.

Third, while many issues are regulated by orthography, many other issues are still explicitly marked as possible variants, especially for the cases when variation is attested in phonology, not only in writing. This makes it possible to avoid labeling any phonological variant as "not correct" and thus decreasing motivation to use the language.

Child agency and horizontal learning in language maintenance practices: Insights on the acquisition of linguacultural norms among the Hamar of South West Ethiopia.

Sara Petrollino, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

The Hamar are an agro-pastoralist people inhabiting the southernmost corner of Ethiopia. This talk describes the "herding game" played mainly by young Hamar children who are not enrolled in formal schooling. The herding game is an example of peer play and collaborative form of learning which allows the cultural transmission of traditional ecological knowledge, and the socialization of Hamar children into pastoralist linguacultural practices. In the talk I will discuss how the game offers the context to a) learn the indigenous categorization system for livestock individuation; b) internalize important semantic distinctions in the terminology for coat colors and patterns (by mapping the categories for livestock appearance on flints, pebbles, quartz and shells); c) practice the Hamar system of address for cattle and humans. During the game, moreover, children get to practice animal-directives and interjections, including animal-directed whistles, and "bell-ideophones", a sub-set of Hamar ideophones which are crucial in a pastoral soundscape. The analysis of the Hamar herding game demonstrates the importance of child agency in cultural transmission, language maintenance and

socialization, and it reveals the dynamics by which Hamar children become competent users of linguacultural features which are essential in a pastoral society.

Sign language vitality & vitalization: an introduction

Victoria Nyst, Leiden University Center for Linguistics

The use of signing is a resilient feature of Deaf communities around the world. In many societies, the vitality of sign languages and their transmission over time is compromised by ideologies and attitudes regarding the relative values of signing and speaking and regarding variations in hearing status. Oralism (i.e. stigmatization of signing) and audism (stigmatization of being deaf) interact with more general developments in society, politics, science, and technology, with fluctuating impacts on sign language vitality both at very local and at very international levels. As a result, deaf communities, especially in Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democracies (WEIRD) countries, have a long history of sign language activism, at times out in the open, and at times forced to go underground. In this talk, I will introduce some efforts of deaf signers and signing communities to maintain and vitalize their sign language. This includes a discussion of ways in which signing communities with indigenous sign languages respond to the introduction of sign languages from WEIRD countries via deaf education in many Southern countries.

Language maintenance in deaf education: sign language revitalisation after a century of oralism: Colombia as a case study

Shane Gilchrist