



The risk of 'taking urgent steps': linguistic diversity and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages

Christine Schreyer, Tania Granadillo & Michelle Daveluy


To cite this article: Christine Schreyer, Tania Granadillo & Michelle Daveluy (2022) The risk of 'taking urgent steps': linguistic diversity and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 43:3, 195-199, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2022.2048840](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2048840)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2048840>



Published online: 27 Apr 2022.



[Submit your article to this journal](#) 



Article views: 1063



[View related articles](#) 



[View Crossmark data](#) 



The risk of ‘taking urgent steps’: linguistic diversity and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages

Christine Schreyer^a, Tania Granadillo^b and Michelle Daveluy^c

^aCommunity, Culture, and Global Studies, University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus, Kelowna, Canada;

^bDepartment of Anthropology, Western University, London, Canada; ^cDépartement d’anthropologie, Université Laval, Québec City, Canada

ABSTRACT

In this introduction, we offer an overview of the topics of language risk, language choice, and language rights in relation to linguistic diversity. We situate this discussion around the recent International Year of Indigenous Languages (2019) and the upcoming International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032). In particular, we consider how the decade’s desire to ‘take urgent steps’ to prevent language loss, might take place on the ground, in Indigenous lands. Finally, we suggest that the papers in this issue, which are focused on language resilience and an anthropological view of language, might be case studies for how an approach to language risk, language choice, and language rights might be enacted during the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 December 2021
Accepted 25 February 2022

KEYWORDS

Linguistic diversity; language revitalization; language rights

The desire to understand and document linguistic diversity has long been a focus of anthropological and linguistic research and continues to attract the attention of both scholars and the general public. However, colonisation, as well as increasing globalisation, has impacted the security of language diversity locally and globally. The papers in this special theme issue were originally presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Anthropology Society/la société canadienne d’anthropologie in order to document how local language issues are both similar, and different, for Indigenous and minoritized languages around the world (Brazil, Russia, Canada, Venezuela, and Papua New Guinea).¹ The papers as a whole reflect on and address the themes of language risk, language choice, and language rights in the various locales where the authors have conducted anthropological research. In particular, the authors question whether declaring languages to be ‘at risk’ of endangerment creates more uncertainty in these communities, and also how uncertainty and ambiguity both shape and, are shaped by, the choices made by speakers of minoritized languages. Finally, the authors also discuss how language rights have been enacted in top-down and/or bottom-up language use and language planning as a measure of intended security or as an impact of insecurity. In fact, linguistic insecurity has captured global attention; in 2019 the United Nations General Assembly declared an International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL). As Thomason notes,

The goal was to call attention to the risks faced by indigenous languages all over the world and to promote the maintenance and revitalization of threatened languages in order to reduce the likelihood of a catastrophic global loss of linguistic diversity. (2019, e274)

One of the many outcomes of this year of recognition of the challenges facing both Indigenous language speakers, and the languages themselves, has been the dedication of an International

Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL) from 2022 to 2032, which will focus on the human rights of Indigenous Language users in particular.² The priorities for the decade were set out in the *Los Pinos Declaration [Chapoltepek] – Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages* (UNESCO 2020). The list of expected outcomes of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages include: Sustainable Development, Human Rights, Vitality, Engagement, Inclusion, Mainstreaming, Sustainability, Empowerment, and Progress (UNESCO 2020, 23–24). These broad categories cover topics that are featured within the papers in this special issue as well, including the connection between Indigenous languages and Indigenous lands, the right to mother tongue education, and the importance of language use for social identity. However, the IDIL is but one of many UN calls to attention focused on both Indigenous Peoples and Languages over the years. For example, 1993 was the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, which led to the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (1995–2004) and, eventually, the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). Shortly after, 2008 was declared the International Year of Languages, although Indigenous languages were not specifically a focus at this time. Interestingly, and relatedly, 2008 was also the International Year of Planet Earth, which aimed to, 'capture people's imaginations with the exciting knowledge we possess about our planet, and to see that knowledge used to make the Earth a safer, healthier, and wealthier place for our children and grandchildren' (Planet Earth, n.d.).³ Much research on Indigenous languages has shown that knowledge about the planet, and local landscapes specifically, is embedded within them although this connection did not seem to have been made explicit by UNESCO at the time. In the upcoming IDIL, 'Indigenous languages, climate change, and biodiversity' (UNESCO 2020, 15) are a key priority.

Therefore, while there has been a building focus on the need to protect language diversity, little attention has been paid to the tangible steps that need to occur for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages to have a greater impact than simply '*drawing attention* to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote indigenous languages' (UNESCO 2020, 5, emphasis added). If the goal is to '*take urgent steps* at the national and international levels ...' (UNESCO 2020, 5, emphasis added) how will those steps take place on the ground, in Indigenous lands? In other words, will concrete action actually occur internationally, nationally, and locally, and if so, what kinds of action? At this point in time, it seems that the IDIL might simply end up adding to the alarmist rhetoric on rates of language loss and language vitality that are also found within earlier works on this topic within academia (Krauss 1992; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Crystal 2002), rather than focusing on the contemporary resilience of both Indigenous, and minoritized, language speakers. Hill (2002) underlined the counterproductivity of such claims. The symbolic violence associated with claims announcing language death, presuming unavoidable disappearance, de facto denying existence to groups not mastering a linguistic code associated with them, has led to critical language documentation efforts focusing on language decolonisation, including reclamation and legitimacy movements and inquiries on language sustainability (Ferguson and Siragusa 2017). The set of papers in this special issue provide perspectives from local case-studies, located across the globe, which could help provide insight into the adaptability of speech communities under threat, documenting how the languages are changing, and moving forward with a focus on the long-term, rather than the short term (even the length of a decade). In her article on 'Resilience and Language', Daveluy (2005) emphasises that in order to understand the phenomenon of community language resiliency, ethnographic evidence:

is instrumental in documenting language preservation. It may counter the numerous assessments of languages on the verge of disappearance that have not yet materialized. Indeed, mechanisms contributing to the sustainability of languages remain poorly explained. Describing the dynamic aspects of language communities should prove useful in this regard. (93)

This supports the points made by Granadillo and Orcutt-Gachiri (2011) in the introduction to their edited volume *Ethnographic Contributions to the Study of Endangered Languages*, where they explain, 'Fundamentally, our work rests on the idea that languages are spoken by human beings

and that it is what human beings are doing with language and how they use language to shape and respond to their life contexts that we want to study, not just the language itself' (2011, 2–3). They continue by explaining that ethnographic fieldwork is essential in language endangerment contexts so that, '... researchers and communities [can] come to understand what is happening to the speakers, not just what is happening to the language' (2011, 3). Therefore, in order to address these two calls to action, all of the papers in this special issue are clear examples of ethnography, grounded in anthropological fieldwork, including long-term engagement with communities and return trips (Schreyer and Wagner 2022; Granadillo 2022). All of the papers also provide an anthropological view of language; a view that emphasises language, people, and relationships, as opposed to languages as objects. In this introduction, we argue specifically, that for any real impact to occur from the IDIL, an anthropological view of language will need to be included. Multilingualism, specifically dialect and language variation, are key in many of the papers, and are intricately linked to the language ideologies of the speakers. As many of the papers also deal with choices communities make about their languages, consensus building is included in some of the papers, which is a topic that is under theorised in linguistic anthropology as a whole.

Linguistic diversity, a focus for the IYIL and the upcoming IDIL, is also key to understanding Kala speakers place within a wider Papua New Guinea linguistic landscape in Schreyer and Wagner's paper. Shulist examines the importance of diversity and multilingualism in her paper on Indigenous language use in the Northwest Amazon, while Granadillo's paper illustrates the importance of documenting diversity within speaker variation as well. Ferguson's paper links changes in policies about language diversity in post-Soviet Russia as significant for continued, and strengthening, Sakha language use. Linguistic diversity is often tied to biolinguistic diversity and issues of sustainability (Maffi 2005) and these connections are evident in both Meek's paper connecting language and cultural knowledge to the traditional lifestyle of Kaska speakers, as well as Schreyer and Wagner's paper on Kala speaker's documentation of the aquatic environments they rely on in their daily lives.

The importance of education as a key piece of the IDIL is also highlighted throughout the Los Pinos Declaration. For example, objective 14 states, 'Ensure inclusive and equitable, quality education, including mother tongue-based, bilingual and multilingual education, and promote life-long learning opportunities for indigenous language learners and users of all ages, genders and abilities ...' (2019, 5) while objective 21 is listed as, 'Inclusive and equitable education and learning environments for the promotion of indigenous languages' (10). Many of the papers in this special issue also focus on education. For instance, Schreyer and Wagner's paper discusses the changing mother tongue education policies in Papua New Guinea and the consequent challenges for local Kala education programmes, while Granadillo's paper describes similar issues in the Venezuelan education system related to teaching Mapoyo, specifically the lack of materials available in the language. Shulist's paper explains the local contradictions of education explaining that, 'The preservation of the many languages of the region is consistently in competition with the need to provide high quality educational opportunities to children from economically and socially marginalized Indigenous communities' (6). All of these papers also discuss challenges with orthographies for the local communities, particularly in instances when orthographic standardisation causes prejudicial views towards the languages. The Los Pinos Declaration includes reference to orthography as an important aspect of educational programmes under objective 23 on 'Interdisciplinary work on indigenous languages' where script development and literacy education are highlighted. A subsection of this objective also states,

Equity should be promoted between the oral and written use of indigenous languages in the education system, in cultural expressions and in the public sphere, promoting orality and local discursive genres and idioms as the context, means and object of linguistic advocacy. (UNESCO 2020, 11)

Finally, Giles' paper (2022) examines second language immersion education programmes for Irish Gaelic speakers and the ways adult speakers are socialised into this environment by sharing stories of family and heritage.

Similar connections between social identity and language use are also highlighted in Meek's paper, for example, she explains, 'to really know who you are, you need to know your heritage through your heritage language' (2022, 19). Ferguson's paper (2022) looks at the differing views of Sakha linguistic and cultural vitality and explains how this is dependent on individual experiences tied to urban versus rural identity. Finally, Shulist's paper examines the complex relationships between identity and language use in the Northwest Amazon (Upper Negro River) where linguistic exogamy is practiced.

Risk is a recurrent theme in the papers and this is also tied to the overall goals of the IDIL; it is because languages are at risk that a decade is required to focus attention on them and remove them from risk. However, this set of papers questions what exactly is putting the languages at risk and asserts that in order to address these 'at risk' languages attention to language use in social contexts is necessary. Granadillo explains that for Mapoyo, while there are other risk factors to the language, such as lack of intergenerational transmission, 'a "standard language ideology" is putting Mapoyo language revitalization at risk and that therefore any revitalization project needs to address ideological domains as well as pragmatic concerns' (2022, 1). Shulist explains that, 'In the context of the linguistic "hotspot" of the Northwest Amazon, it is not only individual languages that are "at risk", but also the diversity of the region itself – in other words, the spectrum as a whole to which these languages contribute' (2022, 2).

Meek problematizes the financial and biological connotations of risk and risk management for Indigenous communities within the settler society of Yukon, Canada, which have limited the ability of community members to move beyond risk to reclamation. Finally, Schreyer and Wagner argue that the uncertainty of educational policies in Papua New Guinea are a risk for Kala speakers since the frequent changes to policy at the national level have impacted local community members' power to make decisions that benefit their own communities – such as the right to teach their Indigenous language (United Nations 2017, Article 14 and 15).

Language rights is a theme that appears in other papers as well. Meek relates the right to self-determination in the Yukon through the Umbrella Final Agreement, a self-governance agreement, as connected to language rights, while Shulist's paper explains for Tukuanoans, 'the battle for language rights has mainly been a subset of this struggle for educational and political autonomy' (2022, 6). As noted above, the IDIL will have a major focus on rights; human rights, language rights, intellectual property rights, and the rights of Indigenous Peoples are all listed in the Los Pinos Declaration (2020). Carpenter and Tsykarev in their analysis of the 2019 IYIL and the upcoming IDIL comment that now is the time to reconsider human rights in the context of Indigenous languages because 'human rights law has evolved over the past decade' (2020, 5) and because of the growing global recognition of the right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples. According to Carpenter and Tsykarev, 'A human rights approach to indigenous language recognizes that these languages are vital rather than archaic, and that governments along with other institutions and actors must work to realize their potential for reasons of human dignity and societal well-being' (2020, 57). It is this focus on vitality, the resilient use of languages within contemporary societies as key to identity, sustainability, and diversity that is the thread that weaves this set of papers together. However, it is also this recognition of vitality in the face of 'critical loss' and 'urgent need' that will help ensure that local, national, and international attention support 'a multistakeholder approach to a multilingual future' (Carpenter and Tsykarev 2020, 129) with tangible, locally relevant, outcomes.

Notes

1. The panel also included papers by Sherina Feliciano-Santos on Taíno language use in Puerto Rico and Nishaant Choksi on Santali script use in Eastern India. These two individuals have since published books on related topics, see Feliciano-Santos (2021) and Choksi (2021).
2. <https://en.unesco.org/news/upcoming-decade-indigenous-languages-2022-2032-focus-indigenous-language-users-human-rights>.
3. <http://yearofplanetearth.org/index.html>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Carpenter, K., and A. Tsykarev. 2020. "(Indigenous) Language as a Human Right." *UCLA Journal of International Foreign Affairs* 24: 49–132.
- Choksi, N. 2021. *Graphic Politics in Eastern India: Script and the Quest for Autonomy*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Crystal, D. 2002. *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daveluy, M. 2005. "Resilience and Language." In *Resilience in Arctic Societies: Proceedings of the International PhD School for Studies of Arctic Societies (IPSSAS)*, edited by L. Kaplan, and M. Daveluy, 89–94. Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Native Language Center.
- Feliciano-Santos, S. 2021. *A Contested Caribbean Indigeneity: Language, Social Practice, and Identity within Puerto-Rican Taíno Activism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Ferguson, J. 2022. "The Persistence of Antiquity: Language Ideologies and Perceptions of Language Vitality among Sakha Speakers." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 43 (3): 214–227.
- Ferguson, J., and L. Siragusa. 2017. "Introduction: Language Sustainability in the Circumpolar North." *Anthropologica* 59 (1): 1–5.
- Giles, J. 2022. "'It Creates a Whole Linkage with Your Ancestral Line': Language Socialisation, Family Lineage, and Language Choice at Diasporic Irish Immersion Events in Ontario." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 43 (3): 243–252. doi:10.1080/01434632.2022.2039676.
- Granadillo, T. 2022. "Mapoyo Language Revitalisation at Risk: When Variation Leads to Uncertainty." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. doi:10.1080/01434632.2022.2039164.
- Granadillo, T., and H. A. Orcutt-Gachiri. 2011. *Ethnographic Contributions to the Study of Endangered Languages*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- Hill, J. 2002. "'Expert Rhetorics' in Advocacy for Endangered Languages: Who Is Listening and What Do They Hear?" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 12 (2): 119–133.
- Krauss, M. 1992. "The World's Languages in Crisis." *Language* 68 (1): 4–10.
- Maffi, L. 2005. "Linguistic, Cultural and Biological Diversity." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34: 599–617. doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.34.081804.120437.
- Meek, B. 2022. "'At Risk' Languages and the Road to Recovery: A Case from the Yukon." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 43 (3): 228–242.
- Nettle, D., and S. Romaine. 2000. *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schreyer, C., and J. Wagner. 2022. "Uncertainty in Diversity: Language Shift and Language Planning in Papua New Guinea, A Kala Case Study." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 43 (3): 262–275.
- Shulist, S. 2022. "Insecurity through Diversity: A Case Study from the Northwest Amazon." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. doi:10.1080/01434632.2022.2039674.
- Thomason, S. G. 2019. "Special Issue on Indigenous Languages: Introduction." *Language* 95 (S1): e474–e478.
- UNESCO. 2020. Los Pinos Declaration [Chapoltepek] – Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages/Los Pinos [Chapoltepek] Amatlanawatilli Mahtlaktli Xihltli ma Motekipanokan Totlakatilstlahtolwan. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/los_pinos_declaration_170720_en.pdf.
- United Nations. 2017. "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples." <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>.