Building the lexicon for awakening languages

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Abstract

Just as language endangerment involves a reduction in the domains of language use, language revitalization involves an expansion of the language into new (or previous) domains. Yet while all language revitalization efforts face the task of augmenting the lexicon to accommodate these new domains, very little guidance or training is available to communities for this purpose. This is especially unfortunate because word creation and the expansion of the lexicon are not straightforward tasks, either linguistically or socially. The creation or repurposing of words is a process fraught with conflicting language ideologies, and should ideally be informed by the lexeme-building processes that already exist in the language. This talk will provide essential guidance on how to avoid these pitfalls while successfully expanding the language into new domains.

There are two important components of expanding the lexicon for awakening languages, one sociocultural, the other linguistic. When awakening a language, it is important to decide whether coining new words is necessary or even appropriate, and to anticipate the consequences of these decisions for the community. For example, older speakers may be unable to understand younger speakers using coined words. Language revitalization projects also often overlook bottom-up approaches, where young speakers are encouraged to coin terms they feel appropriate, using the structures and words that already exist in the language, just as generations of speakers before them did. This ensures that the new words are both relevant to their everyday activities and are something they have a sense of vested ownership for, rather than being just another arbitrary word to memorize, passed down by the language committee. Such bottom-up expansion of the lexicon requires speakers with a sufficient understanding of the language's structure, and this is where linguistic considerations play a key role.

Each language has specific techniques for coining new words, some more productive than others. Using examples of recently-coined words from several awakening languages, this talk will overview the variety of ways languages tend to form new words (e.g. compounding; various types of nominal, verbal, and adjectival derivation; describing an object's function or appearance; etc.), to help speakers and learners of awakening languages identify the specific strategies that are most appropriate for their language.

Summary

A constant need for awakening languages is the creation of words to meet the communicative demands of new speakers. Yet little advice is available to communities for this purpose. This talk provides guidance on how to avoid common pitfalls while successfully building the lexicon in a way appropriate one's language.