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Language Revival, Language Ideologies, and Language Rights

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Acknowledgement

I begin today by acknowledging the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to the Elders past and present, as well as to emerging leaders. I extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

A bit of history

- Born and grew up near Tamworth, NSW in Gamilaraay country
 - 1972-73 studied Gamilaraay with Murries in Moree, Boggabilla, and Tamworth
 - 1974-today – worked with Dieri (Diyari) community members, eastern SA, to document and teach their language, including archive work; also studied Ngamini, Yaluyandi, Pilardapa, Karangura, Malyangapa, Guwamu
 - 1978-today – studied languages of Gascoyne-Ashburton region, WA, including Bayungu, Thalanyji, Burduna, Binigura, Yinggarda, Jiwarli, Thiin, Warriyangga, Tharrgari
 - Since 2003 based in London, with occasional visits to Australia, mostly to see family or work with communities in SA and WA
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Language shift

- since mid-20th century tremendous **reduction** in global linguistic diversity (or different ways of speaking) as people abandon minority language varieties and **switch** to larger and what they perceive to be more economically, socially, and politically powerful regional or national languages
 - governments promote limited numbers of standardized official languages in schools, media, and bureaucracy, aiming for linguistic unity to support, or be a precondition of, national unity
 - results in languages becoming ‘endangered’, no longer being learnt by children and only regularly used by an aging population in increasingly restricted domains
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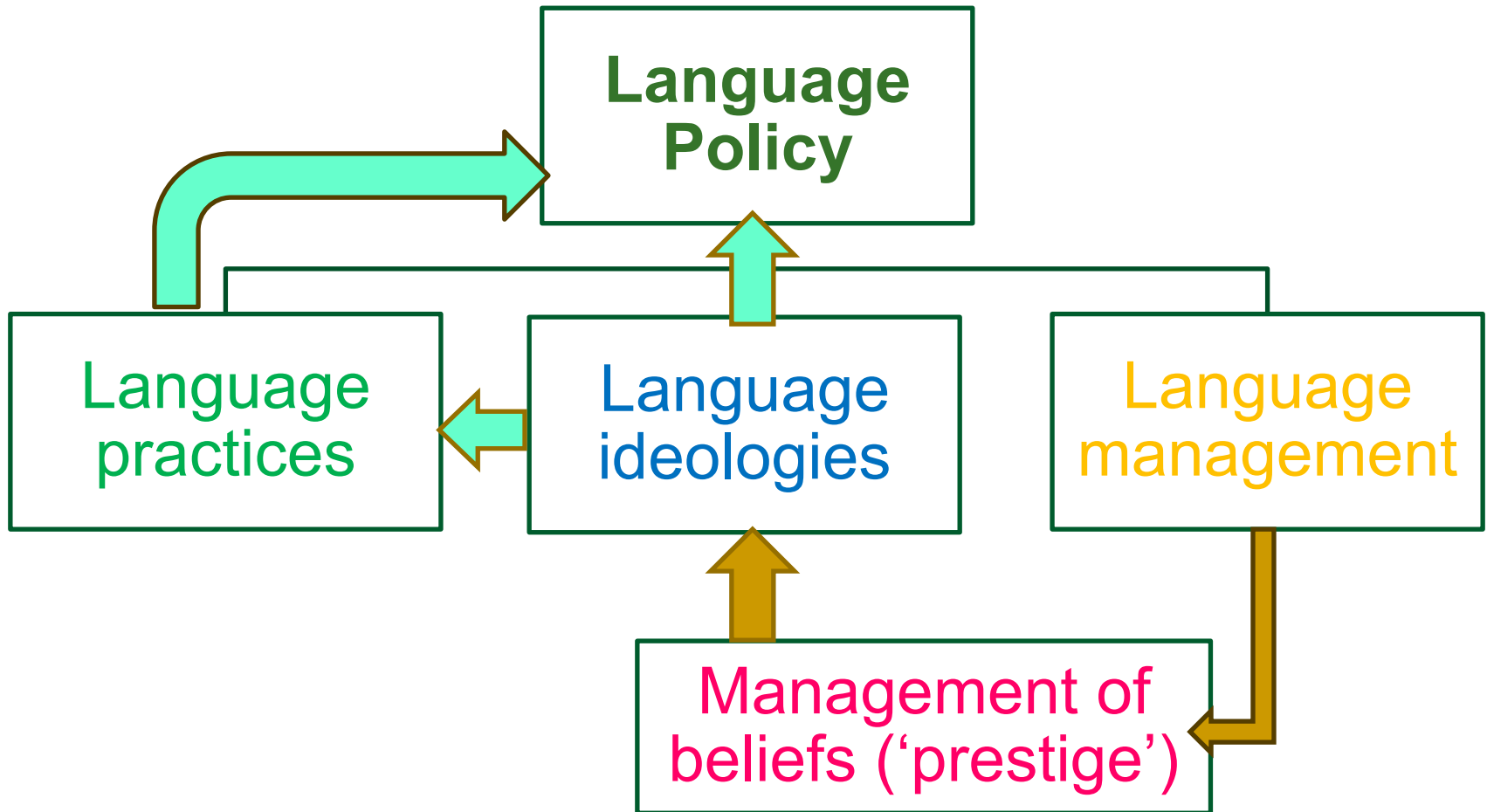
Austin & Sallabank 2014

- language ideology: “system of widely shared ideas, patterned beliefs, guiding norms and values, and ideals accepted as truth by a particular group of people” (Steger 2003: 93)
 - Ideologies about language are largely tacit, taken-for-granted assumptions about language statuses, forms, users, and uses that, by virtue of their ‘common sense’ naturalization, contribute to linguistic and social inequality” (McCarty 2011:10, Tollefson 2006: 47)
 - “beliefs and ideologies do not arise without foundation: they are based on deep-seated predispositions and strongly held ways of thinking and perceptions concerning both language practices (what people *do*) and policies (what people *should* do).” (Austin & Sallabank 2014: 4)
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Causes of language shift

- Understanding **why** and **how** shift takes place involves investigation of language ideologies and beliefs, going beyond 'death' and 'dying' languages (and related metaphors)
 - major factor is **negative attitudes**, which become 'naturalized' through **hegemonic ideologies** of linguistic inferiority and inculcated beliefs regarding the value or utility of particular ways of speaking
 - The more aware speakers and members of speech communities are of ideologies, the more they can be challenged and contested and can be overcome through awareness-raising and human individuality or agency, e.g. language revival
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Interactions (Spolsky 2004, 2009)



Academic & institutional responses

- reflect an **ideology** of language not as interactive human exchange and process but as ‘things’ (**objectified**) which can then be measured, evaluated, scaled, rated (**commodified**) within an ideology and politics of audit (Dobrin, Austin & Nathan 2009)
 - complex multilingual ecologies reduced to bounded entities
 - **result:** endangerment scales (GIDS, EGIDS), maps and atlases, lists of ‘intangible cultural heritage’, ‘hotspots’ of language diversity, ‘last speakers’, media coverage of ‘death’
 - ethics checklists of external requirements, ‘collaboration’ driven by researcher goals and limitations, extractive models of researcher-community interaction (plus ‘giving back’) – Austin (2013) models of research, e.g. “plantation model”
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Unesco

(EX) Extinct

(CR) Critically Endangered

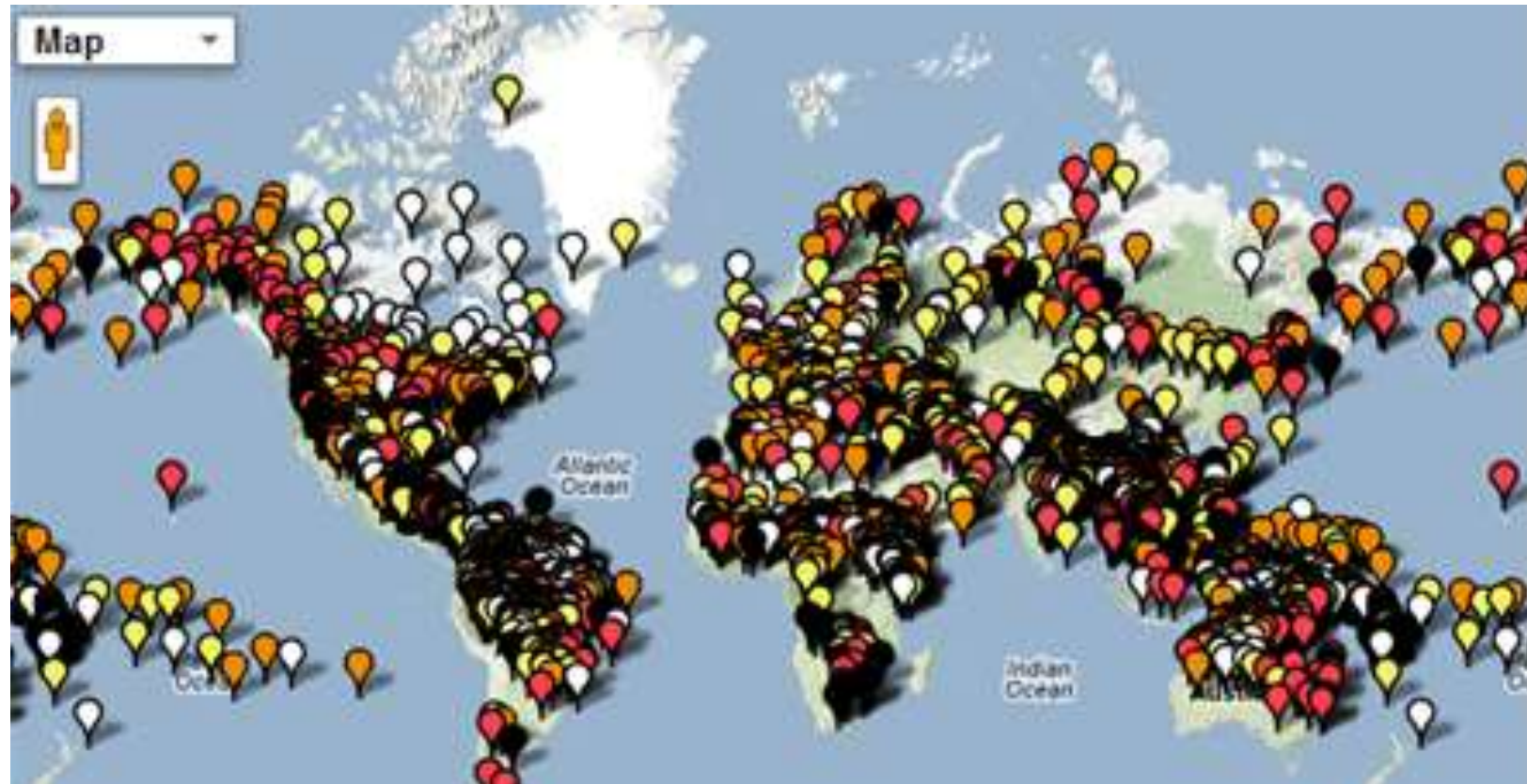
(SE) Severely Endangered

(DE) Definitely Endangered

(VU) Vulnerable

(NE) Safe / Not Endangered

Unesco



- !Gan'ne
- 'Ongota
- A'ingae / Cofan (Colombia)
- A'ingae / Cofan (Ecuador)
- A'tong
- Aasax
- Abaga
- Abai Sungai
- Abaza
- Abkhaz
- Acatepec
- Mazatec
- Achagua
- Aché
- Acheron
- Achi'
- Achuar
- Achumawi

Researcher methods

- **language documentation:** to create audio-visual samples of language use and performances in their social and cultural contexts, ranging from everyday conversations to narratives (story telling) to more ritualized activities such as prayers, ceremonies, and recitations
 - **goal:** creation of an annotated corpus, archived and preserved
 - **revitalization** is typically ancillary and “up to the community”
 - **problem:** documentation and archiving do not easily facilitate revitalization (Austin 2021, Sallabank & Austin 2018):
 - inappropriate materials (restricted, taboo topics, focused on peculiar rather than everyday)
 - focus on past and nostalgia, lacking contemporary engagement
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Researcher methods

- ❑ prescriptivism and negative evaluations of contemporary speech
- ❑ transcriptions, analysis, translations unknown and inaccessible to community
- ❑ focus on ‘best speakers’ – older people who speak fast, mumble, slur, or elide utterances, or even have speech impediments (including lack of teeth) or are hard of hearing. Ignores competent younger speakers
- ❑ fluent speakers rely heavily on background knowledge or history of people and places – recording might not be clear or obvious to others
- ❑ lacks speech directed towards children and language learners, common useful genres missing (lullabies, children’s games or rhymes, jokes), missing simple exchanges or routines useful for early or intermediate learners
- ❑ archives (and legacy materials) may be inaccessible or incomplete, difficult to interpret, require specialist skills and computer software – but potentially rich sources for revitalisation and adaptation

Documentation for revival

- engage wide range of participants (including diaspora) in various roles, collaboratively establish goals and outcomes in community interaction genres (cf. Sonsorol case study), develop local capacity, evaluate regularly, aim for sustainability
 - include language as just one part of wider socio-political concerns about (physical and mental) health, trauma, discrimination (Olko 'language as a cure')
 - carry out activities in relevant locations ('on country') where sensory experience can (re-)activate knowledge (Akin 2025)
 - include non-traditional and contemporary interactional events, activities, and locations, e.g. community meetings, medical centres, places of employment, internet and social media, interactive games
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Documentation for revival

- document young people's language use, including multilingualism and switching/mixing
 - include everyday, often overlooked, aspects, e.g. greetings, farewells, fillers, and discourse markers (equivalents of 'umm', 'aah', 'mmm', 'well then', 'go on', etc.), how to start, stop, continue, and change a conversation, how to make an apology, tell a joke, express disagreement, disappointment, or anger etc.
 - include short, fixed, or formulaic expressions that learners can productively use on a range of occasions
 - for more advanced learners: formulaic or ritualized speech for meetings or ceremonies, for active proficiency and acquiring culturally relevant knowledge
 - metadocument contexts and potential educational uses
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Stakeholders and power dynamics

- Leonard (2021: 157) two major categories of stakeholders in situations of language endangerment and revitalization:
 - **community-internal** stakeholders – community members with language knowledge, current and future language learners, community leaders in language programs and elsewhere, and others with various levels of community engagement
 - **community-external** stakeholders – researchers whose professional work engages with Indigenous languages, various governments, funding agencies, educational institutions and educators, and the wider public
 - to understand their engagement and perspectives: needs, expertise, and goals.
 - language revitalization requires great emotional and spiritual work, thus creating the need for appropriate support
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Ideologies of revival (Sallabank 2025)

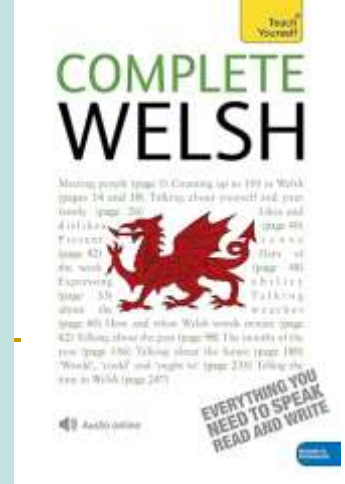
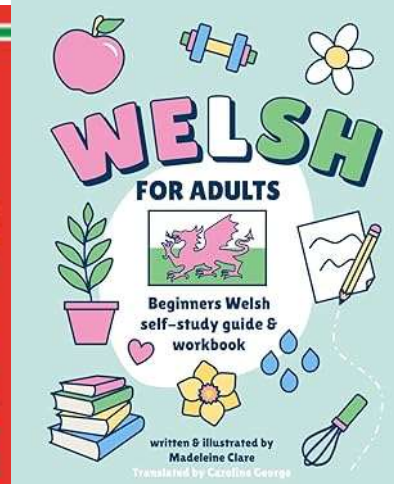
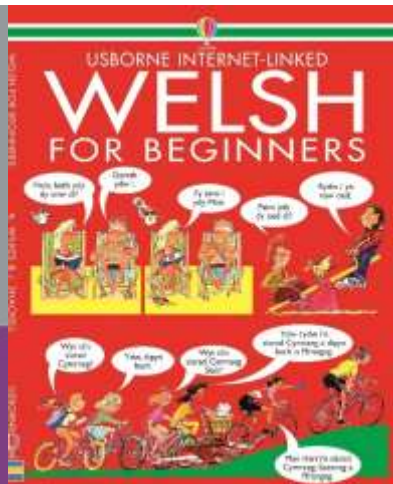
- Many policy-makers and activists see schools as a key site for language revitalisation – cf. Fishman’s advice to focus on the home and community (Romaine 2006)
 - Increasing evidence that children see the place of the revival language as school only (e.g. Edwards & Newcombe 2005, Smith-Christmas 2015)
 - Making children the locus of revival can result in low motivation – little choice/agency but forced by parents (Costa 2014). Need holistic approach that engages post-education youth and adults
 - Dieri sausage sizzle, Arabana on-country weekends, Ranger activities (various sites), Myaamia campouts
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Ideologies of revival (Sallabank 2025)

- Whalen et al. (2016) suggest “emerging evidence ties individual and/or communal health to efforts that promote ancestral language and cultural fluency in a community-driven educational environment”, c.f. Olko “language as a cure”
 - 2026-2030 EU project: UR-ENDLICH “study of resilience and Intangible Cultural Heritage for people facing ecological, cultural, economic, social, linguistic change”
 - Leonard (2021) argues that “language revitalization ... builds and disrupts community dynamics at the same time”. Mismatches between “actual practices and ideal practices ... can be a source of significant tension”
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Case studies of ideologies and revival

- **Welsh** – 1960s recognition of speaker reductions and aging profile
- 1993 Welsh Language Act adopted Welsh-medium equivalence in public spheres and government, immersion schooling
- 1984 S4C Welsh-medium TV, popular entertainment, sports
- 2000s Welsh became ‘cool’ on social media, music, festivals, and among urban young people
- textbooks, language learning materials widely available
- motto: **Cymraeg i bawb** - Welsh is for everyone



- October 2025 *Black Welsh Music Award* and *Trac Cymraeg Gorau* for Aleighcia Scott, began learning Welsh 2022, worked with Welsh and Jamaican musicians



Other Celtic

- **Irish** – ideology as official national language of Ireland though few people regularly speak it, compulsory school instruction and examinations for all but hated and little fluency, creation of Gaeltacht (2% of population), speaker numbers continue to decline (72,000 active speakers in Republic 2022, 44,000 in NI)
 - *Athbheochan na Gaeilge* began in late 19th century, in 20th century significant revival role in music (Clannad, Coors etc.) and cultural festivals, 21st century Gaelic becomes ‘cool’ in urban educated areas (*Gaelscoileanna* immersion primary schools)
 - “20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030” aims to increase number of daily Irish speakers in Ireland from 83,000 to 250,000 by 2030
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Other Celtic

- 2022 Report on Irish Education: increasing number of non-Irish citizens who speak Irish, including 13% of Polish citizens, 13% of Latvians, and 15% of Australians in Republic
- Informal global interest, especially among Irish-heritage learners: 2.3 million Duolingo Gaelic (2016), pubs in London etc.
- Even a soothing YouTube video ...



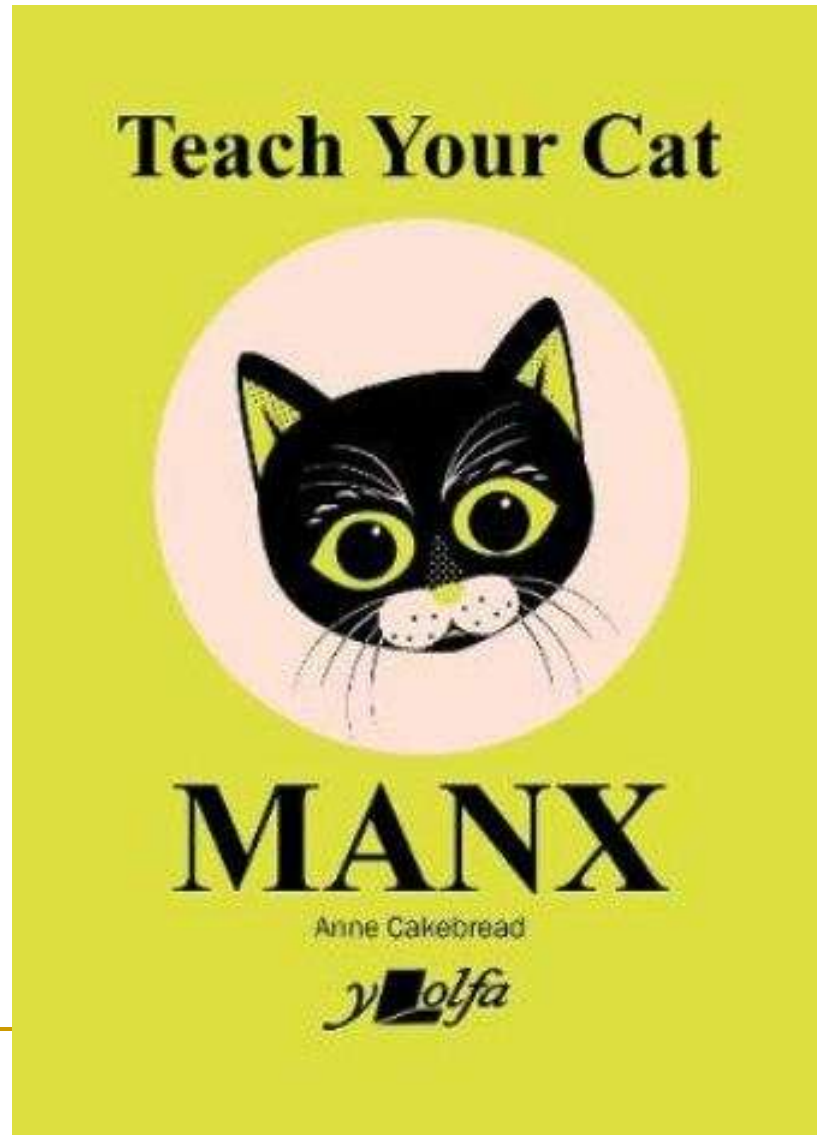
Other Celtic

- **Manx** – last “first language” speaker dies 1974, some partial spoken knowledge remained, revival based on written records
 - 1992 Manx Language Unit promotes revival through education
 - Current revival through immersion pre-school (*Mooinjer Veggey*) and primary school (*Bunscoill Ghaelgagh*), evening classes for all, music and cultural events, *Yn Greinneyder* government language officer
 - Not officially recognised but 2017 government launches *Manx Language Strategy* five-year plan for the language's continued revitalisation, supported by website (<https://www.learnmanx.com/>), claims 2,000 speakers in 2021
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Other Celtic

- On site observations in 2018 show enthusiastic participation of children and adults, government support, openness and welcome to visitors
 - Cooish Manx Festival (5-9 Nov) *Hee mayd shiu ec y Chooish* - we'll see you at the Cooish!
 - Online talks in Manx on poetry, music, radio, Biosphere (<https://culturevannin.im/watchlisten/videos/co-whaiyl-ny-gaeil-907078/>)
 - material for both teacher-led and independent learning open to anyone, including ...
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Other Celtic



Moving from Europe

- To Africa – around 1/3 of earth's linguistic diversity
 - Compare north Africa where Arabic is dominant and local languages (Berber, Cushitic, minor Semitic) are minority and rapidly undergoing shift
 - To Sub-Saharan Africa where typically people, communities and conversations are multilingual and there are not hierarchies of languages, rather languages that cover larger or smaller populations and areas (c.f. Wolof versus Joola in Senegal, Yoruba or Hausa in Nigeria)
 - Colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese) overlay the local ecologies but generally do not replace them, except in some urban areas, especially among the educated elite
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Small scale multilingualism in Africa

- Di Carlo & Good (2014:) in multilingual northern Cameroon “languages are used to symbolize relatively ephemeral political formations” and region is “characterized by frequent language loss and emergence conditioned by changes in territorial and political configurations”.
 - **Indexical language ideology** – code choice constitutes an ‘index’ of identity, context, social relations, or interpretive frames (McIntosh 2005: 1921), not an **essentialist** marker of identity
 - today the languages are vital but Di Carlo and Good argue that notions like revitalisation **do not apply** since loss of one way of speaking has been/will be replaced by another within the repertoires of individuals and groups (contrast Western essentialist ideology of language loss as tragedy to be lamented)
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Small scale multilingualism

- Luepke (2016: 48) argues for similar situation in Casamance region of Senegal: “languages are used in an indexical fashion and multilingualism is a social strategy that enables speakers to index different identities to different stakeholders”
 - Speakers add or subtract languages from their repertoires as social and political needs require different kinds of relationships – languages **index** contexts and are not an **essential** part of identity
 - Multilingual communication in linguistically mixed communities and social settings is normal
 - (Footnote: in various other communities, identity is **indexed** by language not **constructed** by it, e.g. Jewish, UK 2nd generation immigrants – identity based rather on religion, food, behaviour)
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Papua New Guinea

- Immense linguistic diversity that is rapidly changing. Generally, there is no interest in revitalisation or heritage languages, cf. other parts of Pacific: Australia, New Zealand, Hawai'i.
- Kulick & Dobrin (in press) “Even where older speakers lament about the declining use of their languages, few (young or old) seem ready to revitalize or reclaim them as part of their heritage.” Reflects a **language ideology** where change/shift is positive and highly valued.
- “Learning other people’s languages has long been part of the privilege of forging connections across social distance; it is also a mark of their success, signaling one’s ability to attract others’ positive attention.” Traditionally people were multilingual and learning cultures and languages was reciprocal between neighbours.

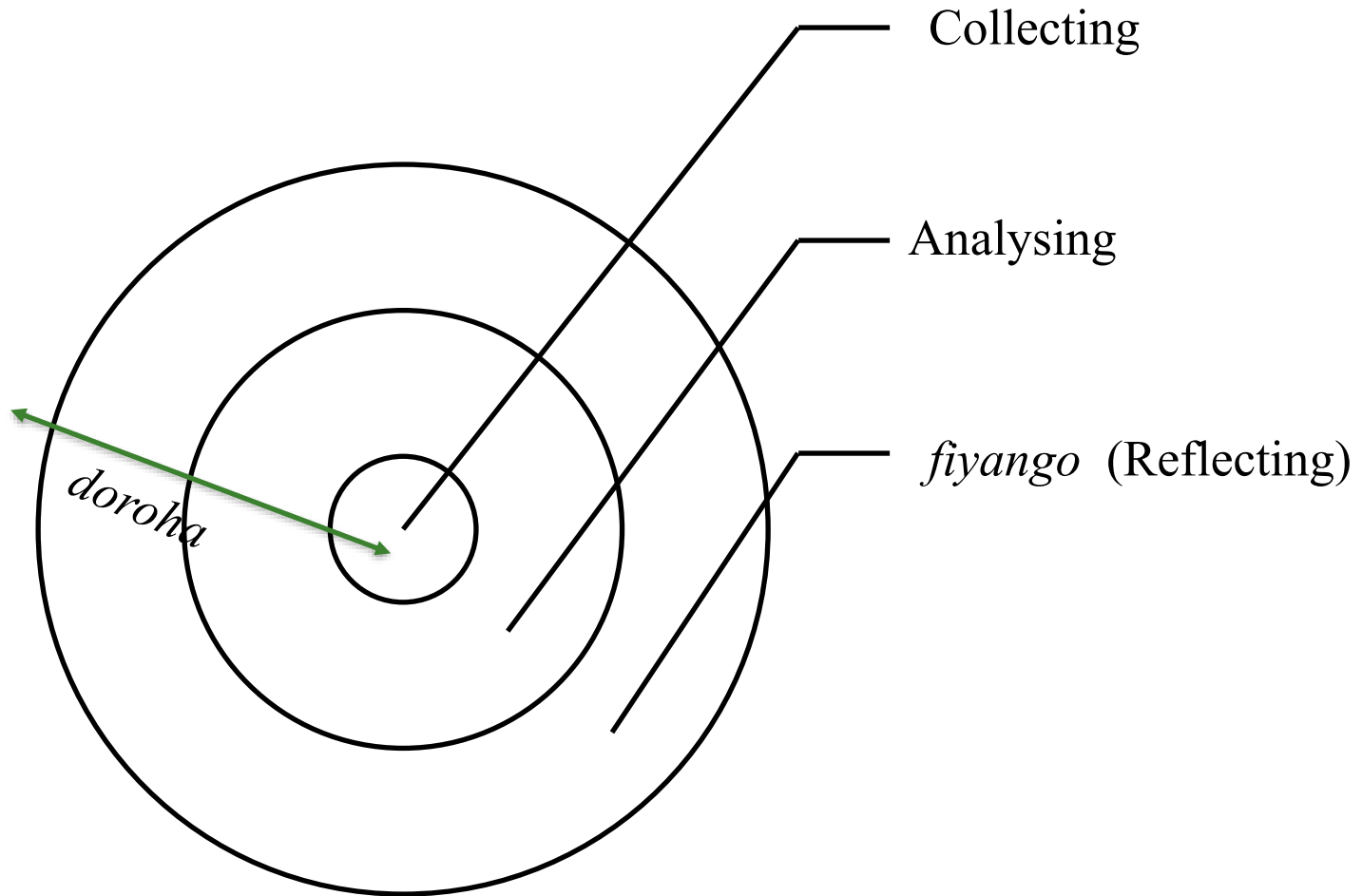
PNG

- “today the language learning goes only one-way, as everyone’s attention has turned up the hierarchy toward the cash economy, jobs, education, and Christianity.” → Tok Pisin.
- In revitalisation there is exchange of knowledge with outsiders, but rather than dictionaries, or language learning materials etc. in return, PNG people want things that **they** value
- like English lessons, and relationships, including paid work, that will bring prestige and money (Brooks 2013)
- Similar lack of concern (or welcoming language shift) can be found in South Asia – people work hard to change identification and language to become “Scheduled Tribes” or “Other Backward Classes (OBCs)” in order to gain economic and social advantages

Asia-Pacific

- Sonsorol minority in Palau (Micronesia) – Vita (2025)
 - worked closely with Young Historians of Sonsorol (YH) who set goals and agendas for documentation and revitalisation of language and traditions, e.g. palm sugar production
 - collaborative model of documentation, learning, and transmission mediated by traditional methods: iterative reflection (*fiyango*, a local storytelling practice), mutual apprenticeship (*doroha*)
 - *active feedback loop*, an agile, relationship-centred methodology for community-led documentation, revitalisation, and analysis
 - other activities: rehabilitating a WWII fortification site, removing plastics from beaches on Sonsorol. Environmental improvement.
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Sonsorolese methods



Conclusions

- Beginning with 18th century colonialism, global language shift has resulted in major reductions in language vitality and ecologies around the world, accelerating in 20th century with nationalism and real-world politics and economics of dominance
- academics, organisations, and language speakers and communities have responded in various ways, reflecting their linguistic ideologies and beliefs about the nature of language in general and their own ways of speaking in particular
- attempts have been made to revitalise or revive languages in some areas, but attitudes to language revival are highly variable at individual and community levels, with mixed goals and outcomes internationally
- There is no one size fits all and no magic solutions that apply everywhere

Thank you!

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