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James Costa

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Is language revitalization really about saving languages? Some insights from 150 years of language revival in Occitania

James Costa Wilson
Sorbonne Nouvelle

1 Introduction: the recent fortune of “language revitalization”

If quantitative data are anything to go by as an indicator of what is important to people today, then “language revitalization” certainly deserves some attention. Of course, language revival is by no means a new thing and as we know it now it originated in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the term “language revitalization” itself took off in the early 1990s along with concerns about language endangerment. Unlike earlier terms perhaps it describes not only minority languages in Europe or former British colonies but also refers to a wide range of social activity worldwide, in particular in Latin America. Even in Europe, the revival movements underwent a deep transformation after the 1990s to respond to discourses about the global loss of cultural and natural diversity (Nettle & Romaine 2000) as well as with the idea that languages can be economically profitable (Heller 2010). The following graph taken from Google Ngram, which counts the number of occurrences of any term in the Google Books database,¹ provides a good idea of the development of the term ‘language revitalization’ in recent years—one which mirrors my own investigations in the academic and language advocacy literature on the topic:



Figure 1: Occurrences of the terms “language revitalization” and “language endangerment” in books digitized by Google Books (1950-2000)

While most studies concerning themselves with this topic focus on how to

¹ Google Ngram website:

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=language+endangerment%2Clanguage+revitalization&year_start=1950&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Clanguage%20endangerment%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Clanguage%20revitalization%3B%2Cc0

assess language loss and to address strategies for “revitalization,” a term that is itself usually loosely defined, the question I would like to ask in this paper is: Why that now? What is it that people are doing when they draw on “language” as a resource to mobilize others around certain goals—in other words, what is “language revitalization” actually about? Why do contemporary language-based movements take the particular form that they do?

In the next sections I propose to suggest a few possible answers to those questions based on fieldwork conducted in Southern France between 2007 and 2012. Naturally, in other areas answers might be different. Language-based movements have much in common in terms of the discourses they draw upon and the references to institutions such as Unesco, but in each case language is used a terrain (Heller 2004) upon which social movements address very local issues by drawing on global discourses that will make their voice stronger in a global arena. In order to suggest some answers to this question, I will draw on examples from the Occitan south of France dating back to before the post 1990 period, but I think those examples have a lot in common with contemporary movements in their organization and in their rationales, and they can still tell us a lot.

I will first analyze briefly how language revitalization is usually defined in linguistics, in order to suggest that those definitions are at best incomplete, if not flawed. Then, based on fieldwork in the Occitan south of France (see below), I’ll redefine revitalization movements as inherently social movements that depend on the mobilization of a discourse about language, before showing that constructing groupness in order to talk about situations of contact between dominant and dominated groups is the main aim of those movements. I’ll argue that revitalization is about redefining the very terms of the contact. Finally I’ll suggest some reasons as to why those movements use language and not, say, religion or a political institution to articulate their claims.

2 What is language revitalization?

Analyzing “language revitalization” is itself a complicated issue in the sense that it is often unclear whose voice, and whose interests, the discussions it entails represent. Revitalization is both an academic and a non-academic concern, pertaining to the field of language advocacy. In many contexts academics who study such issues are themselves staunch language advocates—striking examples can be found in the work of Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (e.g. 2009) or K. David Harrison (2010). Yet whether one looks at academic or non-academic work, one can only be struck by the dearth of work defining either “endangerment” or “revitalization”, generally understood in quantitative terms: while the former is the disappearance of languages, the latter consists in fostering the expansion of domains of use of numbers of speakers. In this respect, the following definition by Leanne Hinton constitutes a classic example of how revitalization is often viewed:

The terms LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION, LANGUAGE REVIVAL and

LANGUAGE RECLAMATION, among others, are all applied to the phenomenon of attempting to bring endangered languages back to some level of use within their communities (and elsewhere) after a period of reduction in usage. (Hinton 2011: 291)

Another type of definition consists in characterizing the processes involved—in the following example by the Swedish linguist Leena Huss, revitalization is propounded as a form of emancipation:

Revitalization can be seen as the emancipation of minorities and their cultures on their own terms rather than on the terms of the larger society as has long been the case. (Huss 2008: 133)

Characterization can also take the form of the various implications of the work involved, here the recuperation and reconstruction of something partially lost—a tendency which overlooks the very fact that “recuperation” itself is a social and discursive construct, part of what needs to be explained rather than the explanation itself:

Language revitalization, renewal, or reversing language shift goes one step further than language maintenance, in that it implies recuperating and reconstructing something that is at least partially lost, rather than maintaining and strengthening what already exists. (Hornberger 2002: 266)

Language revitalization is thus construed not only as a response to language loss (see also Grenoble 2013), but also as a consequence of new global awareness to a global crisis framed in terms of unprecedented loss of languages: according to this discourse, people are caring about languages because they now realize what is at loss. Second, it derives from this that language revitalization is a unique phenomenon, something new derived from the loss in language diversity crisis. And third that the important element in the equation is language: it is language whose form and functions must be expanded.

The approach outlined above is problematic in many ways. For one thing, it disregards the fact that what western linguistics identifies as “languages” have disappeared at an important rate at other times in history (e.g. as a consequence of the Roman Conquest of Europe) without generating language-based movements, as far as we know. Therefore, one precondition for the rise of such movements is the modern concept of “a language”, rooted in European modernity.

Another problem rests in the way such an approach constrains how one approaches so-called language revitalization: one is either in favor or against, and the main questions become: how bad is it? And what can be done? It frames questions in terms of diagnosis/remedy, as illustrated by the various grids elaborated in sociolinguistics to assess situations and deal with them. Fishman’s

(1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) is the best known example of this, but an earlier example is provided in Bauman (1980: 6). In a document aimed at providing Native American communities with language retention strategies, James Bauman identified a series of potential diagnoses for language situations and corresponding retention strategies:

Language status	flourishing	enduring	declining	obsolescent	Extinct
Retention strategy	prevention	expansion	fortification	restoration	revival

Figure 2: Language survival status and corresponding retention strategy

This type of approach, I argue, effectively frames the issues at stake in terms of “what should be done?” and prevents us from asking other types of questions such as: Why are so many people engaging in language based social movements, and why has there been a sharp increase in language based movements since the early 1990s? What is at stake, and for whom? Is it only about language? What makes language a particularly relevant terrain for social struggles now? Is it only the so-called mass extinction that makes it so? Yet it could be argued that many other things are disappearing too, trades, techniques, objects, artifacts, social practices etc., which do not all give rise to social movements.

In the following sections I wish to focus on how language is mobilized by social movements under certain ideological conditions to create language-based groups and to construct a narrative a contact. I will then ask why such movements mobilize “language” rather than something else.

I base myself on several years of fieldwork among language revival movements in the Occitan south of France, as well as on several years as an Occitan language advocate and three years as a teacher of Occitan in Marseilles and in Northern Provence. The area concerned with Occitanist claims comprises roughly the southern third of France (excluding Northern Catalonia and the Northern Basque Country), as well as one valley in Spain and a number of valleys on the Italian side of the border with France.

What makes the Occitan case interesting is partly the fact that it has a long and documented history (Martel 2010; Zantedeschi 2013; Abrate 2001) since its foundation in the 1850s, and partly its lack of success—so that many of its claims were never naturalized, rendering internal debates and tensions are particularly visible. Although the language movement in the 1850s drew on decades of philological and historical work, it was initially the construction of a small group of poets and writers, the Felibrige (see Martel 1997), all belonging to the small bourgeoisie and the intellectual elite. This is an important point as it remains a constant element throughout the history of the movement. While the economic elites left the south of France for Paris as early as the seventeenth century, smaller intellectual elites are the ones that constantly embraced certain aspects of culture in order to articulate their own interests.

3 Language revitalization movements as one possible type of social movement

In order to approach language revitalization differently, it is essential to show that it is in itself not particularly original. It is only so in the sense that such movements use *language* as the basis upon which an argument is formulated, something that was not possible before the late 18th and the 19th centuries. One should thus question the claim that the current surge in interest for “endangered languages” is a consequence of a sudden global awareness of language loss. In fact, discourses about the loss of prestige of the local vernaculars were first articulated by writers in various areas in the south of France throughout the sixteenth century (Courouau 2004), yet they did not, and probably could not, give rise to revitalization. Other conditions are needed for language to become a mobilizing force.

Once we free ourselves from those assumptions, other questions immediately emerge. First, this allows us to consider language revitalization as an objective articulated by a social movement. Social movements, and social activism more generally, aim at transforming individual concerns into collective ones: as Bourdieu put it, “the activist’s work consists precisely in transforming the personal, individual misfortune (‘I’ve been made redundant’) into a particular case of a more general social relation (‘you’ve been made redundant because...’)” (Bourdieu 1993: 38). Language revitalization is thus above all about people in the world rather than about language.

Second, a perspective shift such as described above allows us to redefine language revitalization as one particular case of a more general class of movements. In fact, language revitalization movements are very similar in many ways to what the anthropologist Anthony Wallace called ‘revitalization movements’ in the 1950s, which he defined as collective attempts to bring about rapid cultural change in the face of contact-induced societal transformations (Wallace 1956). Language revitalization movements should thus be understood as one type of revitalization movements, movements that use an element, often drawn from a particular understanding of the past, to project it onto the future in order to legitimize a certain type of action in the present.

The pattern that revitalization movements follow, according to Wallace, can be summarized as follows:

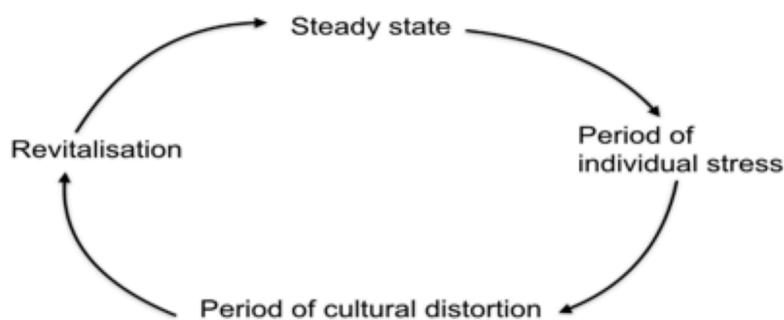


Figure 3: Language revitalization according to A. Wallace (1956)

Such movements also appear to be very similar to what Ralph Linton called nativistic movements in the 1940s:

The avowed purpose of a nativistic movement may be either to revive the past culture or to perpetuate the current one, but it never really attempts to do either. Any attempt to revive a past phase of culture in its entirety is immediately blocked by the recognition that this phase was, in certain respects, inferior to the present one and by the incompatibility of certain past culture patterns with current conditions. [...] What really happens in all nativistic movements is that certain current or remembered elements of culture are selected for emphasis and given symbolic value. (Linton 1943)

If language revitalization is but one possible type of such movements, the question then becomes: why language? And not, say, religion, political institutions or other customs? And why do we see a surge in language based social movements after the 1990s? What is in actual fact at stake within those movements?

4 Constructing minority and majority groups through a narrative of contact

In this section I analyze how language revitalization movements are primarily concerned with the elaboration of a narrative of contact that constructs and legitimizes their stances, and which names and delineates majority and minority groups as part of that process.

During the course of my fieldwork in the Occitan south of France, I became increasingly aware of the existence of a grand narrative which was constantly summoned or evoked in different settings to justify how language should be used and who had the right to do so. One striking element was the primacy of literature and of the written word in the defense of the language, an element usually justified by saying that medieval Troubadours had written in Occitan. So I began wondering what this narrative was used for and by whom, and how it in fact

constructed and performed groupness. This is likely to be the case in all revitalization movements, but it is particularly apparent in the case of Occitan where no well-defined entity called Occitania or no language called Occitan ever existed, except in some mediaeval historical records. So the most important thing that people are doing is actually engaging in a struggle over classifications, which Bourdieu defines as

struggles over the monopoly of the power to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to make and unmake groups' (Bourdieu 1991: 221).

Language revitalization becomes above all a categorizing operation in order to define groups according to criteria which a social movement seeks to impose. Let us look at how this works in the Occitan case. In the diagram reproduced below, and extracted from a short book on Occitan literature and written by a well-known Occitan language writer (Jean Rouquette, known under the literary pseudonym of Joan Larzac), the author summarizes the whole Occitan narrative in order to legitimize the present movement and to explain how and why Occitan literature is important to it. It identifies a Golden Age, located in the Middle Ages, and it proposes two types of social trajectories: the actual one and the normal one, had the French not launched a crusade on the County of Toulouse in 1209. It also proposes a possible reincarnation of that ideal state of things, resulting from the efforts of the language movement, which it calls normal or 100% Occitan. But the graph also does two things, which are both central concerns to the Occitan movement: first it links the medieval era with present day south of France, and it connects geographically unconnected areas, Provence, Gascony and Languedoc as pertaining to the same reality. Second, it founds the unity of time and space on the written word, thus legitimating certain types of knowledge based on the mastery of the written language. The Occitan sociolinguist Robert Lafont refers to this as the "revivalist ideology of the redeeming text" (Lafont 1997: 114).

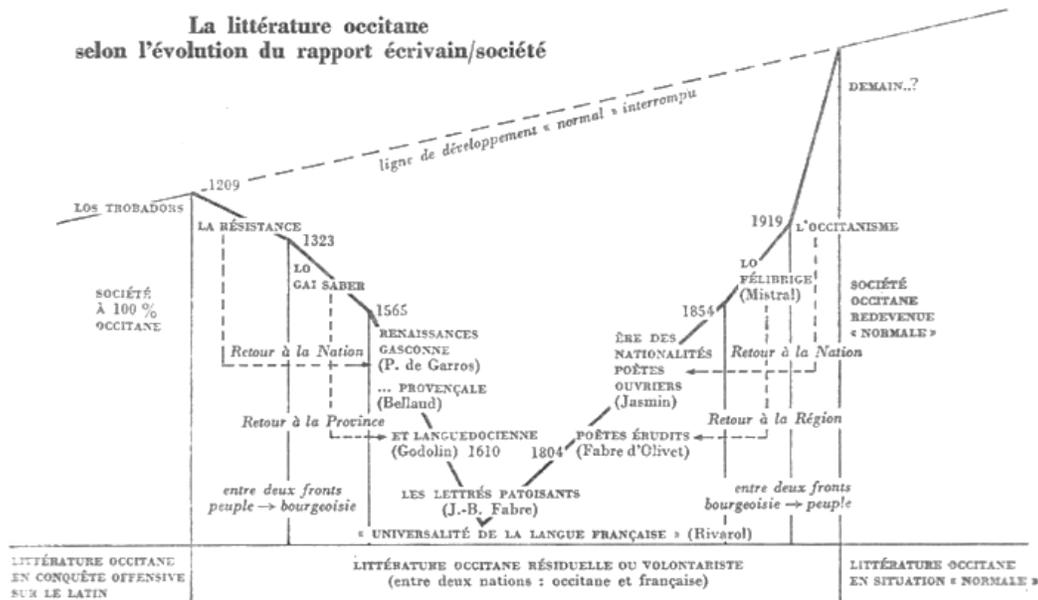


Figure 4: Occitan literature according to the evolution of the link between writers and society (Rouquette 1980: 12)

This narrative, importantly, provides an account and a rationalization of contact and constructs two distinct groups by providing them with ancestors, with a common past and a common geographical frame of reference. It constructs one group, the Occitans, as subdued, and the other, the French, as dominant. And it provides a rationale for the terms of contact between both groups—as well as the key to renegotiate the very terms of contact: language.

This account situates language in a wider societal frame of invasion, loss and revival in order to address contemporary social concerns. It frames individual preoccupations collectively: through the control of our language we also gain control over our land, and our destiny. Crucially, this narrative opposes the dominant categorizations of the South of France as little more than a holiday camp for rich northerners and as a place of second-rate citizens by proposing a legitimate cultural genealogy.

To the first question, what are language revitalization movements, I thus propose the following answer: Language revitalization is best understood as a form of collective action aiming to impose new categorizations of the world through the mobilization of language as a discursive category and through a number of actions seeking the recognition and establishment of a new “language” where another (deemed foreign) is becoming or has become dominant. Through the projection of particular visions of a linguistic past, it seeks to redefine positions of power through the definition of groups as minority and majority, and through the definition of new forms of knowledge on language. Through their actions, language revitalization movements aim at presenting narratives of

continuity where discontinuity might otherwise be seen to prevail. By doing so, they present society with a perspective on itself and on what it is and isn't, what it should be and what it shouldn't be, and what it ought to be in terms of hierarchizations of knowledge, groups and individuals.

5 Why language?

The second question I asked at the beginning of this paper was: “Why language?” Asking the question in this particular way is nevertheless slightly misguided. Let us follow the idea expressed earlier that language revitalization is about a struggle over categorizations, and about using language to construct contact and to renegotiate the terms of that contact between two groups. We must then consider that what Huss said in the quote I mentioned at the beginning of this article (section 2), that language revitalization is basically “the emancipation of minorities and their cultures on their own terms rather than on the terms of the larger society” is fundamentally flawed. Quite the contrary in fact: revitalization should be viewed as an attempt to construct new intergroup relations on terms imposed by the dominant group. Language is, according to this perspective, important not because it was forever a defining feature of the minority group, but because it is important to the majority group who uses it as a feature to define its own dominance. Consequently, using language as a meaningful category can be understood as a way for the cultural elite of a minority group to address the elite of a majority group and to gain recognition through the mobilization of that already legitimate category. In other words, language revitalization is a way to address a more powerful Other by acknowledging one of the sources of its cultural and social dominance, in this case a prestigious written language, but also to assert the prestige of one's own in terms of a literature, a history, a written standard. In this respect, both groups are therefore to be viewed as culturally equal.

Let's look at how this worked for the Occitan movement. The transformation of isolated works on language into what was to become a social movement was initiated by a group of poets in 1854, under the leadership of Frederic Mistral who in 1859 published a long, epic poem called *Mirèio*. It is now a Romantic classic, and it was rather universally hailed as a masterpiece when it came out. The first lines read:

Cante uno chato de Prouvènço.	Emai soun front noun lusiguèsse
Dins lis amour de sa jouvènço,	Que de jouinesso ; emai [n'aguèsse
A travès de la Crau, vers la mar, dins li bla,	Ni diademo d'or ni mantèu de Damas,
Umble escoulan dóu grand Oumèro,	Vole qu'en glòri fugue aussado
Iéu la vòle segui. Coumo èro	Coumo uno rèino, e caressado
Rèn qu'uno chato de la terro,	Pèr nosto lengo mespresado,
En foro de la Crau se n'es gaire parla.	Car cantan que pèr vautre, o pastre e gènt [di mas.

(Frederic Mistral 1859: 2)

A Provence maid I sing,

What though youth's halo only decked her [brow!

Whom through the love-tale of her youth, the corn, Across La Crau, far as the sea, I mean to follow, as an humble pupil Of great Homer. Being but a daughter Of the soil she, beyond La Crau, Was little known.	What though she wore No diadem of gold or damask cloak! I'll have her raised to glory like a Queen, And honored in our own despisèd [tongue; For 'tis for you we sing, O shepherds and mas-dwelling folk.
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(Frédéric Mistral 1867: 1)

Seemingly the poet addressed the people he construed as his fellow countrymen and fellow laborers, whom he presents as a oppressed minority he will vindicate through literature. And indeed Mistral's work can be read as a way to establish groupness and delineate a people out of the linguistic mosaic throughout southern France. But at the same time Mistral also addresses the Parisian intellectual elite. The book was dedicated to Lamartine, one of France's most prominent literary figures at the time, who also wrote a preface to the book. It is also worth noting that the first edition—as well as subsequent editions—are all bilingual.

In fact, the whole history of the Occitan movement, which we can trace back to the sixteenth century, can be read as a dialogue of part of the Southern cultural elite with the Northern French ruling elites. Early texts from the sixteenth century and seek to show that Gascon or Provençal are equal if not superior to French and Latin at a time when the French court was precisely trying to establish the king's language as legitimate in law and literature and to challenge the Latin of the Church and the Universities (Courouau 2001). Later, during the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, interest in the local patois was sparked after Abbé Grégoire launched a full scale survey of linguistic usages in France, generating interest among local historians and philologists throughout the country, and later giving rise to renewed scholarship on the Troubadours—which was instrumental in the later revival. The historian Philippe Martel called Abbé Grégoire the founding father of the Occitan Renaissance.²

How fundamental language was to the creation of one French nation and people after the revolution is well known. But language did more than that: whereas before the revolution the most important categories for dividing people were class based, and ranked people in terms of their belonging to the aristocracy or not, the type of nationalism introduced during the revolution allowed people to be grouped and thought of in linguistic terms. Whereas in the sixteenth century language and region were only secondary criteria in the classification of people, the revolution foregrounded language in a new way that paved the way to the use of language to define other groups within France. When language was defined as a criterion to establish groupness in Southern France, it was conceived of in exactly the same way that French was: with a literary canon, a spelling standard, prestigious ancestors, and an Academy.

What Mistral did in the 1850s was to craft a narrative that addressed both

² Online comment a blog post on the historian Jean-Pierre Cavaillé's blog, 9 February 2014
<http://taban.canalblog.com/archives/2014/02/09/29159432.html>.

the people, framed as a cultural or oppressed minority, as well as the ruling elites in Paris. That is when the social movement gained momentum. So to the question Why language?, I propose the following answer: because it was important to the people that the social movement needed to address in order to negotiate the terms of contact between the two groups it had identified along linguistic lines—that is to say, the ruling elite of the dominant group.

6 Conclusion

Language revitalization in the south of France was never primarily about language. It was about creating groups through language, and defining language as a terrain on which other issues could be played out which entailed the recognition of the cultural elite of the south as legitimate by the northern cultural elite. Language revitalization was to be a movement which was meant to challenge the ways in which territory and people were regimented in nineteenth century France by constructing a bipolar vision of France based on language, and by opposing the idea of France as one and indivisible. The battle was played out throughout the second half of the nineteenth century in the fields of literature, philology and politics, and it continues to this day using the very same techniques. It pits one group against another in order to debate issues of cultural and social legitimacy, but it takes different forms depending on how language is important to who the dominant group is thought to be.

In that respect, linguistic anthropological work on language revitalization cannot be about success or failure, about assistance or neutrality—that enterprise is *de facto* nullified as there can be no success or failure, only the interplay between competing imagined groupnesses to impose new categories or redefine old ones in order to achieve new aims in the world: define new groups, establish or impose new positions of power, erase other types of social actors or other social processes. It is, in other words, a constant *rapport de forces* or power struggle.

Those insights from the Occitan case may help us think the development of language revitalization movements worldwide in a way that is markedly different from the bulk of works conducted on that topic: what if such movements weren't about language, or about the sudden realization that language diversity is at risk, but about the fact that language is a productive terrain to articulate social or territorial claims, because *language* and *heritage* are important categories to the dominant groups in today's world? But if the Occitan narrative can by now fairly easily fit within a nationalist narrative in which language played a central part, what does the investment in language in peripheral groups tell us about how language is conceptualized among dominant groups in late capitalism? In particular, how are categories of language and diversity articulated collectively in late modern societies, and what do they tell us about the regimentation of social difference?

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