

LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND RESILIENCE THINKING

Full Presentation

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Abstract

Resilience thinking is a new approach to the understanding of complex ecological and social interactions and changes, and has so far been applied mainly to the study of ecosystems (Walker & Salt 2006) and community environmental knowledge (Berkes 2008). Resilience is defined as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure” (Walker & Salt 2006:xiii).

This is also relevant for our response to the processes of change which occur during language shift and language loss. Such changes may be very rapid, and may have extreme effects on the structure and use of the endangered language. Many communities around the world are in or rapidly approaching a tip phase, with drastic changes in language ability, structure and domains of use, and even communities whose languages are at present less endangered may be losing a great deal of traditional knowledge. A resilience approach, empowering the community and giving it the respect, control and resources to document and use its traditional knowledge and make its own decisions about language, may allow many groups to achieve a new stability in the face of linguistic and cultural globalisation and top-down language policies.

Situations differ around the world, as seen in Bradley & Bradley (2002); therefore, community responses and needs for assistance from linguists also differ.

Case studies from the Gong community in Thailand and the Lisu community in China, Burma, Thailand and India will illustrate how this may be achieved. The Gong community is very small and localised, with extreme differences in language ability and structure in two villages where it is still spoken, and increasingly restricted domains of use. The Lisu community is very large and widespread, and Lisu is even replacing some surrounding languages. The Lisu language is losing some traditional domains and styles, but has developed a new literary variety and structures for coining new lexicon from internal resources, and is moving into the computer arena with a new Unicode for its orthography.

Local initiative, with support from linguists and local authorities, appropriate training and facilitation, and provision of appropriate materials, can stabilise or even reverse an apparently terminal situation, and also increase the vitality of vigorous languages. Crucially, a resilience approach may improve the self-esteem of the community, motivating and helping them to maintain what they choose to maintain.

References

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