

The Tunica Language Working Group: Mediating a Shared Understanding of Minority Language Importance

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Abstract

The three tropes Hill (2002) identifies divorce language from the speech community that either uses or identifies with it, and they presuppose a need for the writer to justify the language's value and its continued existence. These tropes continue to be widely used in introductory material when speaking about minority languages.

Closer collaboration with community members in both research and publication can help combat tendencies to present the language as an entity separate from those who speak it or identify with it. The Tunica Language Working Group (Kuhpani Yoyani Luhchi Yoroni) is a close collaboration between a group of linguists at Tulane University and the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana's Language and Culture Revitalization Program, including one Tulane graduate student working for the tribal community full time. Through twice-weekly meetings, frequent communication, and collaborative events and projects, the group is able to better mediate a shared notion of why the language, the projects, and the research are important.

Differences in priorities and ideas are still routine, but the close collaboration means that there is more opportunity to address them with community stakeholders as the research is being done rather than dealing with them after the research is published. In keeping with the collaborative nature of the project, and of this panel, this paper has been coauthored with Elisabeth Pierite-Mora, a Tunica language instructor with the Tunica-Biloxi Language and Culture Revitalization Program.

1 Introduction

Academic research on minority languages is almost certain to involve differing goals between and amongst the interested parties. One way these differences manifest most clearly between the linguistic community and minority language speech community is in the scholarly language often used to express the importance of minority and endangered languages. Hill (2002) proposes three common tropes commonly used to situate minority languages and justify revitalization efforts. Hill describes these as “universal ownership”, “hyperbolic valorization”, and “enumeration” (120). These rhetorical strategies center on justifying the language’s existence to those who are not part of the speech or heritage community of that language. They situate the language as an object over which academics have some claim of ownership, to evaluate and examine as objects discrete from the communities that speak them. This divorces the language from the speech community and places them in a position of disempowerment when it comes to presentation and control of their language. Although Hill wrote about these problematic tropes 16 years ago, they remain common introductory framing mechanisms for justifying the usefulness of the project of language revitalization.

The collaboration between the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana and Tulane University began in 2010 when tribal councilmember Brenda Lintinger contacted Tulane professor of anthropology Judith Maxwell asking about the possibility of working together to revitalize the Tunica language.¹ In the last eight years, that collaboration has developed and deepened, with the formation of the Kuhpani Yoyani Luhchi Yoroni (Tunica Language Working Group, or KYLY). The philosophy and organization of the group help to counter the entrenched tropes about minority language research. Rather than just forming a loose affiliation, where communication is *ad hoc*, KYLY encourages constant dialogue, and the group works to make decisions about the language and how to present it only after consensus. This paper elucidates why the tropes Hill identifies carry such currency, how these tropes show up in the Tunica context, and how the communication required by the project helps achieve these goals.

Section 2 reviews of some of the common ways that minority languages are discussed in hegemonic discourse. Section 3 provides a brief history of language documentation and early community efforts at revitalization. Section 4 details the creation of the Tunica Language Working Group and how it operates, section 5

1. Efforts by tribal members and the tribal community to maintain and revitalize their heritage languages and culture greatly predate Tulane’s involvement. Some of these efforts are discussed in section 3.

describes the successes of the collaboration, while section 6 discusses issues facing the group. Section 7 looks at possible solutions and the direction of the project, and Section 8 provides conclusions.

2 Minority language ideologies within hegemonic discourse

The tropes Hill (2002) identifies are powerful minority language ideologies for those who are not members of the language communities themselves (120). As Hill mentions, they often show up in prefatory material at conferences and in papers and books about language endangerment and revitalization. The time since the article's publication has not seen a move away from these tropes (e.g.: Romaine 2007; Harrison 2010; Evans 2011).

As a way of justifying a language's existence to someone who has no personal experience with either the language or the community, they can be very compelling. *Universal ownership* presents languages as economically beneficial troves of knowledge that belong to all of humanity. Often this begins with possible scientific knowledge stored in the language about medicinal plants that could be exploited by western science (Nettle and Romaine 2000, 16; Harrison 2007, 15).

Hyperbolic valorization seems geared toward trying to overcorrect for the low regard in which the public has held the value of minority languages, again through a lens of monetary value. "Treasure" and "priceless", words that Hill notes as common in this trope, are linked to monetary value. As with universal ownership, hyperbolic valorization frames a language in terms of its economic value to hegemonic language speakers. Hill notes that indigenous communities sometimes engage with the trope of language as economic (or religious) value, but usually after the language has passed out of daily use (Hill 2002, 127).

The third trope of *enumeration* places a language as a data point, a statistic in a wider global "crisis" of language death. This dovetails with the parallels often drawn between linguistic diversity and biological diversity. These parallels go back at least to Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1888) and place language loss alongside environmental woes from a loss of ecological diversity. Leanne Hinton states that "[j]ust as the human species is putting itself in danger through the destruction of species diversity, so might we be in danger from the destruction of the diversity of knowledge systems" (Hinton and Hale 2001, 4). While this framing allows language revitalization proponents to appeal to the language of environmentalism, it does

not reflect the view of the language's importance as it is view from within many communities.

Hill rightly notes that the “least dangerous ready-to-hand rhetoric” is the rhetoric of human rights. She notes that while this still appeals to a certain universalism, it does not commodify the language as a good or a statistic, but as belonging to a speech community (Hill 2002, 130). And this lays bare the issue at the core of each of the other tropes that Hill names: they divorce language from the speech community that either uses or identifies with it. The language is abstracted away and its worth analyzed without giving much acknowledgement to the linguistic or heritage community.

Why do these tropes not only survive but thrive when academics and others discuss language revitalization? We posit that it comes from a perception that to justify any language revitalization effort, the *language* must first be shown to carry value to those who are uninterested in speaking it. This value is often expressed, therefore, in terms and rhetoric that speaks to widely held hegemonic beliefs, that value is economic or tied to western concepts of scientific worth (universal ownership and hyperbolic valorization), or that the language's endangerment is part of a crisis that is global in scale and will affect everyone (enumeration and biological parallels).

The problem is even deeper than how academics justify language revitalization. The problem may lie in the premise that it is even necessary for academics to justify the value of preserving a language in a community with speakers who desire to keep it. Some argue that language shift is a conscious, voluntary act (Mufwene 2002; McWhorter 2009), but as Hinton and Hale (2001) points out, even seemingly voluntary language shift may result from unwarranted prejudices against speakers of “foreign” languages or opposition to bilingualism (3–4). In the United States, assimilationism has served as the dominant language ideology for most of the country's history, even after the passage of Title VII and the Native American Languages Act (Schmidt 2010). From a Native American context, these arguments are problematic; with a long, sordid history of assimilationist fervor and national policies designed to extinguish Native American culture and language, it is surprising that Native American language communities have not only persevered, but have often worked tirelessly to ensure the survival and revitalization of their languages.

Instead of presenting languages as objects that contain value for those who do not speak them, our reasoning should reflect an expanded form of the “least dangerous” rhetoric: that people have a right to speak their language, and that language communities that have been put under untold pressure to give up their

languages in favor of English have either retained their language or are attempting to reclaim it. This is justification enough.

3 Early Tunica language revitalization efforts

Tunica (ISO code: tun) is a language isolate that is one of the heritage languages of the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana, a federally-recognized tribe with land in Marksville, Louisiana. As of 2016, tribal enrollment was approximately 1200, with members of Tunica-Biloxi community spread throughout the United States and beyond, with significant communities in the Houston, Texas area and Chicago, Illinois (Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana 2016). The Tunica-Biloxi Tribe has four official heritage languages: Tunica, Biloxi, Ofo, and Avoyel (United States Department of the Interior 1980). Of these, Tunica is perhaps the best documented, having first been written down in 1886 by Albert Gatschet from informant William Ely Johnson. Johnson, along with other informants, later worked with John Swanton in the early 1900s as Swanton furthered Gatschet's work. The most detailed documentation effort occurred during the 1930s when Sesostrie Youchigant, the last known native speaker of the Tunica language, worked with Mary Haas, a collaboration that would result in a grammar (Haas 1940), a set of texts (Haas 1950), and a dictionary (Haas 1953). Though Youchigant died in 1948, some knowledge of Tunica language and song remained.

In the 1990s, Donna Pierite was appointed Language Coordinator by then-chairman Earl Barbry, Sr. Pierite is the daughter-in-law of the first elected chairman, Joseph Pierite, Jr. She began coordinating Tunica language and culture camps from her home in New Orleans, having taught herself the language from the Haas dictionary and grammar and having learned about Tunica culture from her father-in-law. She also created a tribal newsletter entitled *Tawaka* ("Commander"). Pierite continued to teach herself the language, and also taught her children (including co-author Elisabeth Pierite-Mora). After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Pierite and her family moved from New Orleans to Marksville, where they would continue to help preserve the language and culture of the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe. The work done in the 1990s would provide a foundation of personnel and tribal knowledge that would prove invaluable to the collaboration between the tribe and Tulane University.

4 A brief history of *Kuhpani Yoyani Luhchi Yoroni*

In 2010, tribal councilmember Brenda Lintinger approached Judith Maxwell, a professor of anthropology at Tulane University and a member of its interdisciplinary program in linguistics, asking for help in revitalizing the Tunica language. The first result of this collaboration was a children's book based on two of the texts Sesostrie Youchigant had told Haas. The collaboration at this time consisted solely of Lintinger, Dr. Maxwell, and students in Tulane's linguistics program.

Upon hearing of the impending publication of the book in 2011, Donna Pierite and her son contacted Dr. Maxwell to introduce themselves as language keepers who had worked previously on the Tunica language. They had no official role within the tribe at this time.

In 2012, Pierite and Pierite-Mora began meeting regularly with Dr. Maxwell and Tulane students via videoconference. This formed the early basis of *Kuhpani Yoyani Luhchi Yoroni*, the Tunica Language Working Group, or KYLY. Much of the work done during this period was creating pedagogical materials for summer camps, which were now being held at the Tunica-Biloxi Cultural and Educational Resources Center (CERC) in Marksville. Tulane students traveled to Marksville for the camps, and even outside of camp, made trips to work on language projects.

In 2014, the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe formally added a departmental Language and Culture Revitalization Program (LCRP). Pierite and Pierite-Mora were hired soon thereafter as the tribe's two Tunica language instructors. Since that time, collaboration has grown even closer, with the entire project meeting at least every two weeks and subgroups within the project meeting more often than that. The summer camp, which in 2012 had approximately 12 children attend, has grown to an attendance of over 60. A two-day immersion workshop is held for teens and a four-day immersion workshop for adults each January with members of the tribal community and volunteers from Tulane. Starting in 2017, LCRP created a position for a linguist. To date, both linguists who have filled this position had previously volunteered at the immersion workshops and summer camps as part of the Tulane-LCRP collaboration.

5 Collaborative successes

Both Tulane and the Tunica-Biloxi Language and Culture Revitalization Program benefit from this collaboration. It provides LCRP with teachers for the summer camp and expertise in deciphering the documentation of the Tunica language that was done before the death of the last known native speaker. With more people

contributing to the revitalization of the language and the projects that support that goal, KYLY's potential has grown tremendously. Tulane, on its part, gets an opportunity to provide its students with community-based research and scholarship.

One of the important results of this collaboration has been the introduction of a teaching methodology to guide the revitalization effort. This methodology is adapted from Communication-Based Instruction (Supahan and Supahan in Hinton and Hale 2001), wherein the lessons are taught completely in the target language in a five-step lesson plan. It provided a framework for the Tunica language instructors and the tribal linguist, enabling the creation of a set of pedagogical materials that contributes to a whole.

Additionally, KYLY has created a modern orthography, and has resolved some of the inconsistencies found between the Haas grammar and the available texts.

A new dictionary has been created, building upon the Haas dictionary, with the inclusion of neologisms created by the group and by tribal members at the annual summer camps and immersion workshops. The dictionary was largely the product of a Tulane volunteer who wrote her dissertation about the compilation of the dictionary and the issues that arose during its creation (Anderson 2017).

KYLY is also in the process of publishing the first volume of *Rowinataworu Luhchi Yoroni*, the Tunica Language Textbook. This work is the result of the work of many students over the years, under the guidance of Pierite, Pierite-Mora, and Maxwell.

KYLY has found further institutional partnerships that are helping to further the revitalization effort, most notably with the American Philosophical Society, which houses Mary Haas's papers and fieldwork notebooks. The ongoing digitization efforts surrounding these materials are enabling KYLY to more easily synthesize information about the language.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the collaboration is that it helps create a shared understanding of why the language is important to the tribal community. Working in such close collaboration has promoted a better understanding among the those at Tulane of why the language is important and why KYLY is engaged in revitalization work. Instead of looking at the language from afar, and as an object distinct from the heritage community, the language takes on its proper role as inextricably linked to its community. Instead of using the tropes that Hill names, through working with the project, and with members of the tribal community that work ceaselessly to promote the Tunica language both within the community and outside of it, it becomes more obvious that perhaps the reason that this language "deserves" revitalization is simply that the community values it.

6 Issues

Despite all the successes of the collaboration, there are always issues to address. Main among them are multiple language ideologies within the community itself and continued negotiation and resolution of differences between outside linguists and members of LCRP.

Where language ideology is concerned, it is far too neat (and incorrect) an assumption to think that a community shares a single ideology. Kroskrity (2000) identifies as one key aspect of language ideologies that they are best viewed as multiple within a language community (12). Whitaker (2017) examines the language ideologies at play within the Tunica revitalization movement. Of particular interest is the issue within the community concerning authenticity, where learners question whether the Tunica that is taught is “real” Tunica (70). This concern is understandable in an environment where there are no native speakers, and where even the most proficient speakers of the language sometimes have to correct themselves.

Whitaker also discusses the deference to the linguistic expertise of the Tulane contingent of KYLY. “While these linguists work closely with the tribe,” they write, “and are highly knowledgeable in the field of language revitalization and pedagogy, many times they are afforded deference and expertise beyond their actual specializations” (75). This is an area of prime concern for the group. As the group has grown, the number of tribal representatives has stayed the same (Pierite and Pierite-Mora), while the number of outside consultants stands at around 10. This creates a numerical imbalance in addition to a perceived imbalance in expertise.

However, the group attempts to foreground the expertise of KYLY’s tribal members. While the outside consultants have general linguistic knowledge and those that have been with the project for some time have a good grasp of the Tunica documentation, the tribal members have more experience than anyone else with the language, along with a better understanding of the current and past cultural makeup of the the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe. This makes tribal input invaluable and required for any significant decisions.

A final issue that divides the group in a very real way is location. The outside consultants are located in New Orleans, about 160 miles—or a three-hour drive—from Marksville. Though meetings are frequent, they take place over Google Hangouts, and this mediated form of communication has drawbacks. Physical meetings of most of the New Orleans-based group and members from the tribe occur only around summer camp and immersion workshops.

7 Solutions and future directions

In the past year and a half, two new initiatives have changed the landscape of the group in a way that may alleviate some of the problems in section 6. In 2017, the tribe created a full-time position for a linguist. The linguist lives and works in Marksville, and coordinates with those in New Orleans. This has provided added insight into how the resources of those in New Orleans can best be harnessed to serve the daily revitalization work in Marksville. Second, the tribe received a grant from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) to pay five tribal apprentices to learn Tunica language in an immersive environment over the course of three years. As they learn the language, they will begin to work with KYLY more and more closely. This will rectify some of the numerical imbalance within the group, as well as enable more teachers at future summer camps and immersion workshops to be tribal members who learners see regularly.

8 Conclusion

Over the last eight years, the *Kuhpani Yoyani Luhchi Yoroni* has evolved and matured. Throughout that evolution, an emphasis on close collaboration and the necessity of community involvement and leadership has resulted in academics in the group viewing language revitalization not as a project to be viewed through a universalist lens, but through the lens of the heritage community. Scholarship on language revitalization by the group (Anderson 2017; Whitaker 2017) are either devoid of Hill's tropes or mention them only critically. This is at least partly due to the culture of the group, one of close collaboration and a focus on the community.

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