

## Sleeping languages: Exercises on language revival.

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A sleeping language is a language which currently has no fluent speakers. It is a state of affairs many languages have undergone in the past and one which many languages are facing now.

**Activity:** Read the following three passages.

1. From an Australian newspaper:

In the 1840s, a Lutheran missionary recorded the Barngarla<sup>1</sup> language of the Eyre Peninsula in order to translate the Bible.

Ironically, given that the work of missionaries contributed to wiping out native languages, those 170-year-old documents are now helping Prof Zuckermann to rebuild the Barngarla language.

Port Lincoln's Jenna Richards, whose father, uncles and aunties were part of the Stolen Generations<sup>2</sup> and consequently disconnected from their traditional language, says a recent two-day workshop was hugely liberating for her family.

"Prof Zuckermann taught us Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes in the Barngarla language and the kids just can't stop singing it," she says.

There's a push Australia-wide for Aboriginal languages to be taught in schools, with a federal parliamentary committee due to report on its findings later in the year.

From: *Sleeping beauty languages* (Lainie Anderson), Sunday Mail (SA), May 05, 2012.

2. Ghil'ad Zuckermann, mentioned in the article above, is a linguist at Adelaide University who helps communities who wish to maintain or revive their languages. He recommends four steps to help languages which are about to 'go to sleep':

- One, if your language is endangered, do not allow it to fall asleep.
- Two, if your language falls asleep: stop, revive, survive!
- Three, if you revive a language, embrace the hybridity of the emerging tongue.
- Four, if your language is healthy, assist others in linguistic need.

3. "Since 2009, the Baure<sup>3</sup> language [has been] taught in the local schools. However, none of the Baure teachers is a native speaker, and none of the speakers is a qualified school teacher. The course book *Shi vikarow to vekori - Libro de enseñanza del idioma baure* takes this into account and tries to present the language as extensively as possible under the condition that it is still understandable for a second language learner without any previous knowledge of the language." Admiraal (2012: 17)

### Reference:

Admiraal, Femmy. 2012. *Elaborating Teaching Materials for Baure: When Teachers Are Learners*. Paper presented at the Symposium on Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (Kellogg Institute, University of Notre Dame). Available online at: [kellogg.nd.edu/STLILLA](http://kellogg.nd.edu/STLILLA) (accessed 26 October 2012).

1. Barngarla is an extinct language in Australia. In 2012, the Barngarla community, together with Ghil'ad Zuckermann, launched a reclamation of the language, based on 170-year-old documents.

2. The Stolen Generations (also known as Stolen children) were the children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who were removed from their families by the Australian Federal and State government agencies and church missions, under acts of their respective parliaments. They were educated at boarding schools and consequently many of them lost the ability to speak their traditional languages.

3. Baure is a language on the verge of extinction, spoken in Bolivian Amazonia.

**Activity:** Discussion.

- *Why do people want to 'wake up' or 'keep awake' a language that is 'asleep' or about to 'go to sleep'? Do you think there is any point to this? Why not just let the language pass away peacefully?*
- *Can you see any problems connected with the fact that for many teachers and for many fluent speakers of a once- dormant language, the language is not the language they spoke in their childhood?*
- *If the language 'fell asleep' before the coming of technology, how do you think speakers cope with expressing such ideas as 'computer' or 'the internet'?*

**Suggested answers for the teacher:**

Many tribal and aboriginal people around the world feel that their languages had been taken from them, because of colonization. Reviving a language, even if it just a few words, gives these people back their 'identity', their self-respect and empowers them.

*Stop, revive, survive!* is a road sign in Australia to remind motorists what to do if heat exhaustion overtakes them. Zuckermann uses the slogan to make people aware that we can adopt similar strategies in keeping traditional languages alive.

If a revived language has few or no native speakers, then it not only has been revived, it has been transformed. Zuckermann suggests that people accept such hybridity when reviving a language. In this view, it is better that the language continues to be spoken under any and all conditions, rather than it ceasing to be spoken all together. However, some remaining native speakers may feel that the revived form of the language is not 'genuine' and that their language has been taken away from them – again. First of all by white colonists, then by the revivers. This is a tension which is often to be found in minority language communities and it is a difficult problem to resolve. One of the questions to be asked is: should communities focus on the past and how the language used to be spoken, or should they focus on the future and on what the next generation can do to keep the language alive?

Many communities reviving languages find creative ways to produce new words. The Wampanoag language is being revived by activists in Massachussetts, USA, and they are using documents written by missionaries in the nineteen century to make up new words as and when they need them. If you have access to the internet, an interesting clip to watch is:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDAdYjhg2xl>. This clip describes just how new terms are coming to be invented in the Wampanoag language.