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Mitigating institutional attitudes toward sign languages: A model for language vitality surveys

This paper is about attitudes toward sign languages. The paper presents an idea to help make sign language surveys better in the future. In 2018, UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) published a sign language survey and a spoken language survey together for the first time. This was very important to show that spoken languages and signed languages are equal. But the sign language survey has some weaknesses. The idea presented in this paper says that: when people make sign language surveys, they should be aware of discrimination and negative attitudes; they should give signers access to the survey in sign language; and they should help signers decide what actions they can do to protect their sign language.

Keywords

Sign language users, sign languages, deaf communities, language vitality, institutional attitudes, language endangerment

1. Introduction

Assessing the vitality of languages has been a concern of national and international institutions for the past 20 years, and has been spearheaded by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), which declares that

‘language diversity is essential to the human heritage’ and ‘the loss of any language is thus a loss for all humanity’ (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003, p. 1). When UNESCO began this work in the early 2000s, sign languages were not included in its attempts to collect vitality data on languages to determine their level of endangerment (Webster & Safar, 2019). But by the early 2010s, UNESCO began including sign language scholars in its discussions about the vitality survey, so that sign languages could also be included in the *UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing*.

This paper is part of this strand of work on sign language vitality that began in 2011 with the adaptation of UNESCO’s 2003 ‘Language vitality and endangerment’ survey, which was created to gather data on spoken languages, to make it suitable for collecting data on sign languages. The adaptation was led by Ulrike Zeshan at the International Institute for Sign Languages and Deaf Studies (iSLanDS) at the University of Central Lancashire, and the subsequent data collection and analysis by a committee at iSLanDS resulted in vitality ratings being provided for 15 sign languages (see Safar & Webster, 2014, and Webster & Safar, 2019, for descriptions of this rating process). These efforts led to UNESCO releasing a survey on signed languages alongside one on spoken languages for the first time in 2018. This survey differs from those of 2003 and 2011, as it does not only focus on vitality. UNESCO classifies languages using the names in *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, which lists 149 sign languages (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2021).

Throughout the trajectory of this work, it has often been noticeable that there is a substantial imbalance of power when large institutions and scholars using hegemonic

or dominant spoken languages attempt to gather data from users of sign languages (e.g. Adam, 2015), especially when small-scale sign languages are targeted. This imbalance is a result of systemic structures and realities that are slow to change. Increasing the capacity of deaf scholars and fostering deaf-led research, which has been the concern of the iSLanDS Institute from its outset, is a key way of addressing one side of the imbalance, that is, sign language communities' lack of power (cf. De Meulder, 2017b). However, the other side of the imbalance, namely the disproportionate power held by large institutions that use hegemonic spoken languages, also needs to be addressed so that the attitudes that they hold about languages (which may inadvertently reinforce the disadvantaged status of sign languages) are mitigated. Institutions tend to stratify and subordinate small-scale languages, which leads to a vicious circle wherein powerful languages become more and more powerful while smaller ones shrink and disappear in greater numbers, similar to what happens in the current extreme neo-liberal form of capitalism with ever-more wealth becoming concentrated in the hands of the few (e.g. Knyght et al., 2011).

The language attitudes and ideologies of institutions like UNESCO can often be ascertained through analyzing the content of what they put into the public domain, including their policy documents (Krausneker, 2015). The presentation of the UNESCO Survey of World Languages (2018) suggests an ideology that the most valuable and important spoken languages are the four spoken languages in which the questionnaires and instruction manuals are available (English, French, Spanish and Russian). This also carries the implication that spoken languages are more valuable than sign languages, as there is no version of the questionnaire available in any sign

language. One of the reasons why surveys are done, and why they are worthwhile beyond the field of language research, is that they give language communities empirical data to take to policy-makers and funding bodies to lobby for revitalization measures. However, by denying these language users access to the very survey that could help their efforts, institutions may be unwittingly reinforcing their disadvantage.

Section 2 below summarizes this problem with representing the views of language users (2.1), along with two other conceptual problems that may cause a detriment to sign language vitality research, namely the self-reinforcing nature of institutional attitudes (2.2) and the tokenistic nature of language data (2.3). Then, section 3 of this paper proposes a model to help institutions actively mitigate such factors to prevent them negatively impacting sign language users and thereby thwarting their admirable goals. The model carries the position that efforts to treat languages equally and empower signers should be at the heart of sign language research, the spirit of which is largely in line with the ethos of institutions and organizations that endeavor to collect data on language vitality such as UNESCO. Finally, section 4 provides a conclusion.

2. The conceptual problems

2.1 The language users' views are not represented

The first of the three basic conceptual problems is that language surveys often fail to represent the views of language users, particularly when sign language users are involved. This section discusses two parts of this problem: institutions' attitudes toward language users, and users' access to language surveys.

Institutions' attitudes can typically be discerned through their public-facing discourse (Krausneker, 2015). UNESCO's discourse on language endangerment appears to emphasize the languages themselves as entities, calling them 'cultural tools and expressions of human experience' (Rosi, 2008, p. 12) and 'a rich storehouse of human culture...some of which is under threat of extinction' and expressing concern about the 'fragile diversity' that they represent (Moseley, 2012, p. 20). This kind of discourse is now prevalent around the world, and the depiction of 'diversity' as precious and desirable has made the central focus the language itself, instead of the language users or their interactions (Costa, 2013). In this discourse, sign languages are portrayed as 'intangible cultural heritage' (UNESCO, 2019) and 'national artifacts' without acknowledging the complex ways in which deaf people are left to work out their identities and communication needs at the local, regional, national and global levels (Parks, 2015, p. 214). A preoccupation with bestowing national identities on sign languages at the expense of regional or cultural identities, which has been criticized in the sign language literature (e.g. Nonaka, 2004), is also seen in the *Ethnologue*. The language names used within the *Ethnologue* are based on the ISO 639-3 Registry of Languages (Lewis, 2009; Parks, 2015), giving this registry a strong influence on the institutions and organizations that attempt to represent sign language users and gather data on sign languages. The language naming decisions, however, are heavily influenced by 'methodological nationalism' (Parks, 2015, p. 227):

Methodological nationalism appears to impact decisions about who gets a language and who does not in the ISO 639-3. [...] signed languages appear to be recognized first and foremost at the level of the nation-state, potentially ignoring a great deal of human diversity within and across national borders. [...] The ISO 639-3 and *Ethnologue* are primary sources of knowledge about languages for international organizations. The types of knowledge they accept, and knowledge they distribute, impacts the linguistic landscape and allocation of resources.

The aim of organizations that take on the challenge of gathering data on language vitality is typically to raise awareness about and preserve endangered languages. As Crawford (2000) notes, if this aim existed in a vacuum, then the work of addressing language endangerment would be straightforward. But this aim is confounded by language users' three overarching beliefs, in 1) individualism: putting oneself before the community; 2) pragmatism: concentrating on utility instead of tradition; and 3) materialism: being guided by consumerism more than by morals or ethics (Crawford, 2000, pp. 72–73). These beliefs often lead people to favor borrowing from or adopting languages that are seen as more economically valuable, as can be seen in the use of constructed sign systems (Scott & Henner, 2020). This is perhaps exacerbated by what Roche (2020, p. 164) refers to as the 'state of abandonment' in which signers and speakers of endangered languages find themselves. He describes this as 'a lacuna where several disciplines intersect, conspiring to deny users of endangered languages the theoretically informed analyses and comparative perspective they need to generate

effective methods for addressing “language endangerment” (ibid.). It can be precarious for institutions to base their research on the endangerment paradigm without accounting for language contact and the immense pressures caused by beliefs in individualism, pragmatism and materialism, especially in the context of abandonment. This is because users may not realize the implications of their language-shifting, and may subjectively assess their language as having a higher vitality than more empirical scoring suggests (McKee & McKee, 2020; Webster & Safar, 2020; see also Snoddon & De Meulder, 2020, on language shift working differently for deaf people than for hearing people).

Attitudes toward language users are not only reflected in the institutional discourse but also in the institution’s linguistic choices (Wodak, Krzyżanowski, & Forchtner, 2012), especially in who is granted linguistic access to the research tools and who is not. Institutional rhetoric on language endangerment is typically presented in languages such as English, whose speakers ‘enjoy symbolic domination’, and this ‘creates an enormous gulf between them and speakers of truly endangered languages who typically experience sociocultural marginalization and economic subordination’ (Kroskrity, 2011, p. 180). Moreover, Berezkina (2018) points out that institutions usually choose to put their resources into simplifying information in a majority language, rather than translating it into minority languages. This is seen in the UNESCO (2018) Survey of World Languages: both versions (the sign language questionnaire and the spoken language questionnaire) are only available in English, French, Spanish and Russian, which are four of the six official languages of the United Nations. The other two, Arabic and Chinese, are not represented. This presentation suggests an ideology that the most valuable and important spoken

languages to the UN are these four spoken languages, and hence the questionnaires and instruction manuals are made available in these languages. There is no version of the questionnaire available in any sign language. This may create a barrier for sign language users and make it less likely that their views will be represented in the survey results (Webster & Safar, 2020). Berezkina (2018) gives a list of several different reasons that institutions select certain languages over others, including legal, economic, functional, pragmatic, moral, conventional, and technical reasons. It is likely that translating a research tool such as the UNESCO Survey of World Languages into a sign language poses functional and technical challenges. There may also be conventional reasons, which refers to the tendency for institutions to consider something a 'reasonable practice' if others are doing the same thing (Berezkina, 2018, p. 107).

2.2 Institutional attitudes are self-reinforcing

Institutions' linguistic and metalinguistic choices can reveal their language ideologies both explicitly and implicitly, and the replication and dissemination of these ideologies by institutions can make them seem normative (Philips, 1998). Because institutions mostly adhere to ideologies that are already powerful, their language choices tend to further reinforce the hegemony of the existing standard (Philips, 1998; Ricento, 2009; Fitzsimmons-Doolan, 2019). Educational institutions can categorize and rank languages 'as more or less valuable and as legitimate or illegitimate', because the education system has a 'monopoly in the production of legitimate language competence' (Pulinx, Van Avermaet & Agirdag, 2014, p. 544). According

to Bourdieu (1979), this system and its institutions work to reproduce themselves so that the social and linguistic capital that they own will be preserved, and this requires subordinated language groups to accept the superiority of the dominant language group. In the case of UNESCO, its Survey of World Languages (2018) reinforces the importance of political and economic aspects of language use, and deprioritizes aspects related to the home, natural environment, and local traditions.

In the 1940s, it was seen as desirable for UNESCO's language research to have the aim of inspiring 'unity amidst diversity' and helping people to 'demagnetize the war-making diversities we defenders of democracy believe to be wrong' (Cuthbertson, 1947, p. 521). For a long time, UNESCO has overtly valued majority languages and standardization. In 1948, a UNESCO committee of language experts stopped short of recommending 'for the whole of the world, one single language, either natural or invented', but arrived at an agreement that 'there should be two world auxiliary languages, French and English, and, at least, seven regional auxiliaries, varying in different parts of the globe' (Hart, 1948, p. 317). Though much has changed in the past 73 years and this statement clearly does not reflect current beliefs or practices with respect to minority languages, the remnants of this historical bias are still apparent in the disempowerment of many language users.

<FIGURE 1 HERE>

Figure 1: Question 16 in the sign language questionnaire (UNESCO, 2018)

Research on language vitality frequently focuses on the economic and political spheres including government policy, for example on the use of the language in

education, the media, and revitalization programs. There are fewer questions about local culture, nature and the environment (Webster & Safar, 2020). Methodologically, this contributes to a somewhat circular kind of reasoning where political aspects of language use are reinforced while environmental and cultural aspects are increasingly relegated to the margins. This may further disadvantage and disempower the users of minority languages and strengthen the influence of people who use standard majority languages (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 509). It also enables institutions to reinforce their own importance. The hierarchical way in which the question options are structured in the UNESCO survey (see Figure 1) implies that for example ‘international’ aspects are the most important and ‘local’ are the least important (Webster & Safar, 2020, pp. 21-22). This positioning may emphasize the vulnerability of sign languages, which are ‘already in a precarious position because of their lower status, smaller number of users [...], patterns of transmission, which are different from spoken languages because most deaf children are born to hearing non-signing parents, and [...] limited availability of resources, such as dictionaries [and] learning materials’ (Moriarty, 2020, p. 196). At the same time, it is not always the case that the involvement of national or international policy in the fortunes of a particular sign language actually benefits its users (Snoddon & Murray, 2019). Many sign languages have been the subject of extensive research, often through public funding, and yet their users remain marginalized (James, Adone, & Maypilama, 2020; see also Haelewaters, Hofmann, & Romero-Olivares, 2021, on the wider phenomenon of ‘helicopter research’ on people in the Global South by scholars in the Global North):

The Yolŋu people of North East Arnhem Land [in Australia, who use Yolŋu Sign Language, a unique small-scale sign language] are

becoming increasingly heavily researched. These research agendas are often influenced by global and national agendas within evolving state projects that favor culturally particular kinds of development philosophy. More so, powerful neoliberal market logics, funding criteria, corporate, economic, and administrative principles constrain the structure and potentials of university departments and “think tanks.” These aspects of a dominant Western worldview shape the processes and purposes of investigations into Yolŋu life. These are investigations of the kind that do not necessarily benefit Yolŋu...

(James, Adone, & Maypilama, 2020, p. 202)

Even where governments have constitutionally recognized sign languages, such as New Zealand Sign Language (McKee & Manning, 2015, 2019) and British Sign Language (Lawson et al., 2019), this has not been enough to change the factors that are causing them to decline in vitality, such as low rates of intergenerational transmission and the scarcity of deaf schools (Snoddon & Underwood, 2017). On the other hand, options in the UNESCO survey that refer to local activities and the ‘primary [socioeconomic] sector’ are at the bottom of the list of choices (see Figure 2), and there are few questions or options that mention local culture, nature, or the environment (see Figure 3).

<FIGURE 2 HERE>

Figure 2: Question 17 in the sign language questionnaire (UNESCO, 2018)

<FIGURE 3 HERE>

Figure 3: Question 21 in the sign language questionnaire (UNESCO, 2018)

<FIGURE 4 HERE>

Figure 4: Question 18 in the sign language questionnaire (UNESCO, 2018)

It is perhaps ironic that even as institutional ideologies equate linguistic diversity with biodiversity, they do not seem to valorize the connections between the natural environment and sign languages (cf. Zeshan & De Vos, 2012; Henner & Robinson, 2021). For example, in the UNESCO survey the concept of using the language to describe ‘nature and the universe’ (see Figure 3) is not broken down any further, unlike the economic and political aspects, even though this domain may be incredibly profound and central to users’ daily realities. Looking through a supranational institutional lens that magnifies economic functionality may not be the best way to evaluate sign languages, especially small-scale sign languages whose users live in rural communities. This framework affects the thoughts and assumptions even of sign language instructors: the curricula that they use to teach their languages are often written to serve aspiring sign language interpreters, instead of the parents and families of deaf children (Snoddon & Underwood, 2017). The focus on training interpreters instead of parents reflects the prioritization of economic activity outside the home and the relegation of childrearing (a non-economic activity) to a low status. (As noted by an anonymous reviewer, this pattern is likely also due to parents often rejecting signed language training because that means accepting that their child is deaf and may use something other than the spoken modality. Sometimes this rejection is encouraged by doctors, audiologists and other professionals who assert that signed language conflicts with learning speech.) This is apparent to some extent in the structure of the

UNESCO (2018) survey, which puts home-based and non-economic activities lower down in the lists of options (see Figure 4) or misses them out altogether. James et al. (2020) assert that these kinds of institutional frameworks worsen the imbalance of power between sign language users and majority spoken language users, and create a situation where local traditions and reciprocal engagement are devalued. Another aspect of this is the general idea that deaf signers need ‘rehabilitation’ and assistive services that are provided by professionals such as social workers, educators and interpreters (De Meulder & Haualand, 2021); this is something that makes the circumstances of sign language users different to those of minority spoken language users.

2.3 Language data are tokenistic

This section is about why institutions’ collection of data on languages could be seen as tokenistic, by looking at two components of this issue: that languages are not actually bounded, enumerable entities, and that institutions’ activities address symptoms but do not change underlying discriminatory structures.

First, it has been argued that the enumeration of languages, and the framing of languages as bounded entities, are based on questionable premises that are especially problematic for sign language users (Hill, 2012; Kusters, 2020; Webster & Safar, 2020; Braithwaite, 2020). Enumeration of languages is also an integral part of the ‘diversity’ ideology, which according to Kroskrity (2011, p. 180) obscures the injustices visited upon minority language users and ‘[decouples] endangered

languages from the political economic realities of their speakers, thus encouraging a limited, sympathetic support that can not be readily transformed into a subversive alignment'. He argues that the rhetoric of this ideology characterizes languages as comprising the heritage of humanity as a whole, instead of culturally cohesive groups of signers or speakers, and therefore makes it more difficult for such groups to harness the remarkability of their own language as a vehicle for their political empowerment (ibid.). Similarly, Hill (2012, p. 128) says that the enumeration of languages can become 'a gesture of power that contradicts our goals'. She says that in the drive to prompt policy-makers to fund language preservation and revitalization initiatives, institutions like UNESCO disseminate numerical data in an effort to worry and scare people into action (ibid.):

The publication of such statistics clearly has compelling force for some audiences that are targets of endangered-language advocacy. However, [...] the theme of enumeration includes some negative entailments. [...] This implicit message of power entailed by the enumeration of languages and speakers contradicts the celebration of the local and the support of the oppressed that is the explicit goal of endangered-language advocacy. Furthermore, this implicit message is heard clearly by members of local communities, who, knowing the ways that numbers can be and have been held against them, may fear and resent it.

(Hill 2012, p. 127)

This enumeration relies on the notion of languages as discrete entities with clear boundaries, and may therefore force signers to perceive instantiations of multimodality (e.g. fingerspelling and initialization) as the incursion of one language into another, rather than the result of signed languages being created by a deaf minority who are always surrounded by a hearing majority (Moriarty, 2020; García et al., 2021). This can lead to ‘sign language purification ideologies’ that ‘stigmatize many everyday language practices of deaf people’ such as transnational signing and translanguaging (Moriarty, 2020, p. 197).

Secondly, institutions and their policies do not tend to have much success in altering the underlying discriminatory structures that cause language endangerment. Roche (2020) goes so far as to argue that ‘endangerment linguistics’ has yet to offer any sound explanation for how languages lose vitality, and has ‘not only failed to slow global language loss but has in fact grown hand in hand with its acceleration’ (p. 166). Despite the legal recognition of sign languages in many countries, many of their deaf citizens still experience considerable marginalization and inequality through being denied access to sign language for communication (McKee & Manning, 2015) and education (Dotter et al., 2019), and it continues to become less and less common for deaf children to learn sign language (Snoddon & Underwood, 2017). A factor that contributes to this is the flimsy connection between institutional policy and attitudes on the one hand, and the practices of language users on the other (Romaine, 2002): ‘Overtly expressed attitudes are not actions; positive attitudes cannot save a language without concrete measures’ (Sallabank, 2013, p. 344). Rather than showing a clear causal relationship between language attitudes and actions, empirical research suggests that attitudes do not align with real-life behavior (Krausneker, 2015). In

addition, the kinds of surveys and resources generated by UNESCO and the *Ethnologue* are still largely based on factors and issues that affect spoken languages but may not be appropriate for measuring the vitality of signed languages (Webster & Safar, 2020).

3. The conceptual model

In this section, I propose a conceptual model that may be useful for institutions that endeavor to gather data on the users of endangered sign languages, and want to mitigate the impact of the problems described in section 2. This model suggests that sign language vitality surveys should be critical, accessible, and tactical (see Figure 5). Though this model has been conceived with sign language surveys in mind, it is hoped that its basic principles can also be applied to spoken language surveys, inverting the typical model of applying spoken language models to sign languages (Zeshan, 2020). But this model is aspirational, and it may not always be feasible for the survey itself to meet all three of the aims. Fulfilling these functions requires, for example, adequate resourcing and planning from the outset, which are not always available to survey designers.

<FIGURE 5 HERE>

Figure 5: A conceptual model for institutions carrying out sign language surveys

Firstly, the institution should adopt a critical perspective to mitigate the reinforcement of existing power structures by looking for excessive bias toward political and

economic aspects, as well as toward factors that are based on spoken languages. The data collection instrument might redress the power imbalance by making efforts to include items or formats that are more likely to engage sign language users. Statements with Likert-scale options that exploit pictures and emojis could be used instead of questions, for instance (Kipp et al., 2011; Bosch-Baliarda, Soler Vilageliu, & Orero, 2019), and it may be worthwhile to ask about the language in terms of cultural identification, emotional value, day-to-day utility, and efforts and intentions to ensure that the language is transmitted to new users (cf. Kirmizi, 2020). These could target instrumental language attitudes (Baker, 1992), such as beliefs about how useful the language is in achieving a certain external goal such as getting a job; and integrative attitudes (McClelland, 1958), such as beliefs that knowledge of the language will lead to increased prestige or respect from other people. Such underlying feelings can become activated in unexpected ways, as was seen in the sudden increase in the public visibility of sign languages in press briefings during the Covid-19 pandemic, which led some European governments to officially recognize their national sign language in legislation for the first time (e.g. Sign Language of the Netherlands; see Bolier, forthcoming). It is signers' pre-existing commitment to and prioritization of their sign languages that leads to such rapid and effective activism (Bauman & Murray, 2014; De Clerck, forthcoming). Vitality surveys should therefore be sensitive to protective effects which can stem from the strong undercurrent of cultural identification, emotional affinity and readiness for advocacy that many signers have with respect to their sign languages. For example, the survey could target these effects by asking language users to rate statements such as 'In crisis situations, XSL signers come together and fight for their rights' and 'XSL signers have succeeded in campaigns to get access to information in XSL'.

Next, accessibility, which is perhaps the most important feature of the model, means that the creators of sign language surveys should ensure that there is at least one signed version of the survey, perhaps presented in the lingua franca known as International Sign as a first strategic step (Kusters, 2020). (This might be done in a question-and-answer format such as that used by two of the members of the endangered sign languages project committee at the iSLanDS Institute to present the first results of the survey in 2014: <https://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/activity/atlas-of-world-languages-in-danger>.) This is by no means a guarantee that any signer will be able to fill in the survey, as International Sign is derivational of relatively powerful sign languages, and signers from Asian countries in particular may see International Sign as Eurocentric and not especially helpful to them. However, it is an incipient practical step toward maximizing the number of signers who can understand the questions and opening up pathways for further translations carried out by and for deaf sign language users. It also has the psychological effect of making deaf signers feel more included, validated and welcome. Even for those who are amply skilled in written languages, it improves accessibility by demonstrating the institution's alignment with users of visual languages. The process of making this provision gives institutions the opportunity of building connections with deaf communities, for example by appointing multilingual deaf experts to undertake the translation of the survey and support its dissemination to other groups of sign language users around the world (cf. Braithwaite, 2020). Under the leadership of these experts, the survey respondents can benefit from learning more about the processes of data collection and analysis, as well as building more knowledge and critical thinking skills in relation to their own language and its sociolinguistic profile (cf. Palfreyman, 2020). This

capacity building approach has been used successfully in research with sign language users to foster more meaningful representation and empowerment of the language community (Bauman & Murray, 2014; Zeshan & Webster, 2019). This approach is most successful where it is planned and budgeted for up front and embedded throughout the process of data collection, analysis and dissemination.

Finally, the survey should be designed with a view to highlighting possible tactics and strategies that can support the users of sign languages, to enable the production of an ‘effective community response’ (Roche, 2020, p. 166). This is the most challenging part of the model, because the need for empowerment and constructiveness can conflict with the need for impartiality and neutrality in an empirical instrument.

Therefore it is not envisaged that the survey itself can fulfil the function of approving and carrying out strategies, but the survey could be designed to make it easy for sign language advocates to transpose the results into real-life actions. In other words, the survey results might communicate actionable suggestions that can then be discussed and potentially taken up by the language users. In the past 10 years, the amount of academic literature on sign language vitality has increased and more deaf organizations have achieved success in lobbying for recognition of their sign languages. Their tactics can now be harnessed as templates. Fitting them into a vitality scale as examples of constructive actions could be an ideal way to build awareness and inspiration among other groups who are facing similar circumstances. For example, Finland-Swedish Sign Language (FinSSL) was given a status of ‘severely endangered’ by the endangered sign language committee at iSLanDS, who were using UNESCO criteria (Safar & Webster, 2014). The level of ‘severely endangered’ meant that FinSSL got a score of 2, the second-lowest vitality rating on

the 1-5 scale. Sign languages with the lowest level of vitality, but which were not yet extinct, received a score of 1, which meant ‘critically endangered’. This status helped the Finnish Association of the Deaf to make members of Finland’s Parliament aware of this language, leading to its inclusion in the Sign Language Act of 2015 and prompting the government to make funding available in the national state budget for activities to revitalize FinSSL (iSLanDS Institute, 2015; De Meulder, 2017a). A survey using this scale might include the FinSSL example in its dissemination of findings, to suggest what might be possible for other groups whose languages receive the same rating.

Studies on how this can be and has been done for sign languages are still relatively scarce. But the literature on spoken languages has emphasized the vulnerabilities of endangered language users and the deleterious ways in which they are impacted by being marginalized due to their language (e.g. Bradley, 2019; Meernik & King, 2021). Because researchers ‘have the materials and the language knowledge to work with communities’, they should seek to support the language users ‘by training, encouraging, and working with them to prepare tools and materials and helping them to do what they want’ (Bradley, 2019, p. 9). In other words, researchers and institutions that endeavor to collect data on endangered language users have an ethical duty by virtue of their privileged position to question and disrupt the self-reinforcing nature of power structures that consciously or unconsciously work against vulnerable groups. For instance, in some regions the characteristics that correlate with linguistic marginalization can have the severe consequence of putting groups at greater risk of violence perpetrated by armed actors (Meernik & King, 2021). A minority group whose language is endangered ‘can be seen as prime real estate for fighting’ because

the fact that they are already marginalized makes them easier to invade and control (Meernik & King, 2021, p. 12). This then further harms the vitality of their language, because the continuous threats gradually decrease their sense of security and social cohesion, and diminish their culture. In terms of strategies to counteract this, Bradley (2019, p. 6) recommends using the term ‘reclamation’ instead of ‘revitalization’, because reclamation is broader and can

start at any stage of language shift, not all of which can appropriately be viewed as revitalization or maintenance [... and] may require a range of strategies and methods [that] differ greatly according to the stage of endangerment that the language has reached, the community’s wishes, and the available documentation of the language.

To facilitate this flexibility, for each level of endangerment, there could be general suggestions so that where a 1-5 rating system is used and a score of 5 represents the highest vitality (as in the UNESCO paradigm), this corresponds to strategies that consider the undue influence that users of this language may have over other language users, and ensure that where this language is involved, deliberate efforts are made to empower the users of other languages. This might fit American Sign Language, for instance, to which many signers throughout the world have shifted, especially in Africa (e.g. Lutalo-Kiingi & De Clerck, 2017), although it still faces frequent opposition among parents and medical professionals. Level 4 may indicate that a language’s users have neither undue influence nor undue vulnerability, so that the suggestion might be to undertake activities that safeguard and monitor its existing

vitality. Levels 3, 2 and especially 1 might point to the need for urgent action. For all of the levels, intensive communication with the language users would be needed to determine how to address the risks they are facing, and give them support where needed so that they can produce action plans. The same level may have different implications in different settings, and local conditions must be valued and taken into account. As noted by Braithwaite (2020, p. 190), '[i]nterventions based on the incorrect assumptions that local people are unaware of their own situations and incapable of creating their own solutions are unlikely to have positive outcomes'. Top-down measures that fail to draw on the language users' expertise can not only fail to benefit them but can actually result in harm (De Clerck & Lutalo-Kiingi, 2018). Indeed, vitality surveys themselves are heuristic, top-down instruments that are associated with academia, a realm from which deaf signers have been systematically excluded. When signers are given full access to surveys and the chance to engage with them in an empowered way, they may well reject them. Therefore the model does not necessarily need to be tied to the fixed concept of surveys but can be understood more flexibly as seeking to inform efforts to engage sign language users with institutions on their own terms.

4. Conclusion

The model presented in this paper, which emphasizes the need for sign language surveys to be critical, accessible, and tactical, aims to help institutions engage, empower and benefit sign language users. As this is only a conceptual model, its efficacy will remain unknown until it is applied to a real-life survey. In the course of

presenting this model, the paper has touched on improving sign language surveys, criticizing power relations in sign language research, and the relationship between activism and research. These strands need to be explored more fully in future articles to facilitate a more detailed understanding of the relationships between the various methodological, normative and empirical issues raised here. These also include the politicization of research and the risks that this poses, as well as how to set out criteria for language users' engagement, for example taking into account the stability of the region where they live.

Vitality surveys and other large-scale language surveys are still relatively scarce due to the enormous amount of resources and research expertise that are needed to design and administer them. The ones that have been produced, especially those developed by UNESCO over the past 20 years, are highly commendable and have captured valuable data that has already been used by advocates to bring the languages to the attention of parliamentary representatives in order to gain official governmental recognition of their languages (e.g. De Meulder, 2017a). The first-ever worldwide survey on sign languages released in tandem with a survey on spoken languages was an impressive milestone for the field of linguistics and for UNESCO in 2018. It is hoped that future efforts in this area will move toward more deliberate intentions to empower the users of minority languages, and that this model may help institutions make closer connections with sign language users in particular.

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