

REVIEW

# Reclaiming languages and preserving identities

Manuela Correa OLIVEIRA 

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)

## ABSTRACT

David Bradley claims there must be a mindset shift in terms of the treatment given to endangered languages. For that matter, “dead language” is no longer acceptable, but rather “sleeping language”, for instance. Providing examples of awakened languages, such as Lisu and Bisu, Bradley reaches out linguists and non linguists to reclaim languages in order to protect cultural identities. In spite of the work being done by scholars, the presenter argues that research on endangered languages must have governmental support along with universities and other authorities. It is only with conjoined forces that languages can be reclaimed and cultural identities can be preserved.

## RESUMO

David Bradley defende uma mudança de mentalidade no que se refere ao tratamento dado a línguas em perigo de extinção. Desta forma, “língua morta” não seria a expressão mais adequada, e sim “língua adormecida”, por exemplo. A partir de exemplos de línguas revitalizadas, como Lisu e Bisu, Bradley convida linguistas e não linguistas para reivindicar línguas com o intuito de proteger identidades culturais. Apesar do trabalho já realizado por estudiosos, o apresentador argumenta que pesquisas relacionadas a línguas em perigo de extinção devem contar com apoio governamental, juntamente a universidades e outras autoridades. Somente com forças conjuntas é que as línguas podem ser recuperadas e, assim, identidades culturais podem ser preservadas.



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David Bradley's lecture on Resilience Linguistics to the event ABRALIN ao vivo comes as a wakeup call not only to technical linguists, but also to a broader audience which includes non linguists as well. His main argument is that we need to join forces towards reclaiming endangered languages in order to maintain the identity of a given community and to have a better understanding of society.

The presenter claims there has been a clear change in dealing with endangered languages in terms of terminology: "language death" should no longer be an appropriate term to be used, but rather "language endangerment", and "a dead language" is preferably referred today as "a sleeping language", only to name a few. This shift is of the utmost importance, because understanding a language is at sleep means, consequently, that it can be awakened. Therefore, reclaiming a language should always be possible.

Emperor Claudius tried to revitalize the Etruscan language in the first century A.D., an example of several attempts to bring a language back into use which have failed. As for successful attempts, Bradley highlights the work being done by the Boasian school, which have documented languages since the 1880s. Rest assured successful revitalization projects require efforts that should not come only from community individuals or researchers. Throughout his talk, Bradley advocates in favour of the need for national and international systematic support that must take place in order to document and preserve languages, such as the project developed by the *Comité International Permanent des Linguistes* (CIPL), a foundation that currently works with the UNESCO support.

Nevertheless, David Bradley seems to make a campaign for raising a worldwide awareness towards language reclamation and reminding everyone that this matter should involve governments and educational systems. One must not take for granted that language is identity and representation. In Rodrigues's words:

Every human language is unique in the way it codifies knowledge and experience, for it has been shaped and reshaped following the needs for the adequate expression of an extremely diversified and variable complex of mental representations. A true understanding of mankind can ideally be achieved only with the knowledge of every particular culture and society. (RODRIGUES, p. 1, 2014)

Taking into account that language reclamation is not an exclusive matter for scholars, linguists ought to create material for raising such awareness, but material that can be equally accessible to the general public. This process should count on governmental support since we must take into

consideration other non-linguistic factors that might involve different departments, e.g. health and security departments.

Throughout his lecture, the presenter does not let his audience forget the importance of resilience thinking in linguistics, to which he would refer in his lifetime work as Resilience Linguistics. He argues that being linguistically resilient towards endangered languages is promoting language reclamation, which he has done for *Lisu* and *Bisu*, two case studies presented in his talk. The former has been part of his research since the 70s and it is a work in progress whose goal is to meet the perspective of the community. According to Bradley, linguists must bear in mind that the first step towards language reclamation should come from the community. Afterwards, actions involving the improvement of government policies should take place.

Although Brazilian languages were not part of the presenter's main subject, one wonders how Resilience Linguistics correlates to indigenous languages. Research has found there are currently around 200 indigenous languages spoken in Brazil. *Ticuna* is an Amazon language spoken by more than 20.000 speakers today and much of its preservation has to do with the fact that *Ticuna* is still part of small schools' curricula (SEKI, 1999). However, around 75% of languages spoken in the country have vanished due to severe policies adopted by the settlers throughout colonization times, about 500 hundred years ago (RODRIGUES, 1993). Had there been more awareness of a resilient linguistics, many cultural identities would have been preserved.

David Bradley shrewdly highlights that language is linked to attitudes, policies and culture, amongst other equally important factors. It is not only about verbal and/ or written communication, but true identities. The *Ticuna* case is certainly the result of an attitude of communities and linguists working together to reclaim a language with systematic governmental aid. All in all, the process of language reclamation requires the work of technical linguists and people with less academic background as well. It involves a task force towards promoting, awakening and preserving cultural identities.

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