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JOSHUA NASH

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Review article: Stop, revival(istics), (linguistic) survival(istics): Zuckermann's *Revivalistics* and Giacon's *Yaluu*

Joshua Nash
University of New England

Giacon, John. 2017. *Yaluu: A recovery grammar of Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay: a description of two New South Wales languages based on 160 years of records*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.

Zuckermann, Ghil'ad. 2020. *Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1. Introduction

I had the pleasure smack bang in the middle of my PhD candidature in March 2009 to attend the *First International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation (ICLDC)* in Hawai'i, USA. There have since been further ICLDC conferences, all focusing to a greater or lesser extent on issues relating to documentary, descriptive, revitalisation, and historical linguistics. Because of my work on placenaming and contact language research in the Pacific and Oceania at the time, I had by extension become a part of what was by then a burgeoning field of enquiry, which had evolved around several decades of early American linguistics and anthropology *qua* Boas, Bloomfield et al., canonical documentary linguistics works by the likes of Himmelman (1998) and Woodbury (1993), and a strong backdrop of Australian historical linguistics, language documentation, and grammar writing *qua* Dixon et al., e.g. Dixon (2002), Dixon & Blake (1983).

While the two books under review may appear incongruous because they are addressing different things — Zuckermann’s is largely an empirical and theoretical statement about processes of revival, and Giacon’s is a revival grammar brought about through his long-term and practical term engagement in language revival and living on country — the contrast they demonstrate is worthwhile: language revival-cum-revivalistics is a multifaceted discipline with many vantage and entrance points. It seems timely to consider where the state of the art in language revitalisation currently is, and how this in-2009-nascent-field has progressed and changed. Reflective works such as Austin (2016), Seifart et al. (2018), and McDonnell (2018) all consider the inroads the discipline of language documentation has made, especially since Himmelmann (1998). They explore refining and reinterpreting the genre, and where the field is likely headed. In a world presently and acutely affected by Covid-19, where Australian interstate travel, let alone international movement, for the purpose of conducting linguistic fieldwork for language documentation, seems like a faraway pipedream, let us reflect on some pre-‘unprecedented times’ insights and productions into language documentation and historical linguistics when travel for documentary science was less complicated.

2. Zuckermann: *Revivalistics*

Ghil’ad Zuckermann’s *Revivalistics* introduces a transdisciplinary field of enquiry surrounding language reclamation, language revitalisation, and language reinvigation. The author distinguishes between *revivalistics* and *documentary linguistics*, the latter being the established field of recording endangered languages before they fall asleep, a terminology preferred to ‘dying’. Where documentary linguistics puts the language at the centre, Zuckermann posits that revivalistics should put language custodians, its speakers, at its centre.

The book is divided into two main parts, reflecting Zuckermann’s international work in language revival from the Promised Land (Israel) to the Lucky Country (Australia). He does this by analysing critically his Israeli mother tongue, and exploring reclamation of what he calls ‘dreaming sleeping beauties’ in Australia and globally. As I read in a handwritten dedication to one recipient of the book by Zuckermann: “A language revivalist ought to have a heart of gold, balls of steel, and the patience of a saint”.

The book’s first section provides an analysis of Hebrew language revival, which took place from 1880–1930. Zuckermann’s position opposes conventional accounts that the language of the Hebrew Bible has now been miraculously taken up and re-spoken by modern Israelis. For example, Zuckermann claims that Israeli has grammatical characteristics like gender that are not present in Hebrew. He demonstrates systematically how

grammatical cross-fertilisation with any/the revivalists' mother tongue(s) is inevitable in the case of successful *revival languages*. As such, revival languages do not conform to the tree model in historical linguistics. Whereas the tree model implies that a language only has one parent, Zuckermann argues that successful revival languages follow a *Congruence Principle*, which is statistical: the more contributing languages a particular linguistic feature occurs in, the more likely it is to persist in the emerging revival language. According to Zuckermann, revival languages share many common characteristics, and they should therefore be classified under the revival language 'family' rather than under a specific language family such as Semitic.

The second part of the book applies lessons learned from development of the Israeli language to revival movements in Australia and worldwide. It describes the why and how of revivalistics, and systematically proposes ethical, aesthetic, and utilitarian reasons for language revival, suggesting, for example, that language, albeit intangible, is more important than land or country. Here Zuckermann offers practical methods for reviving languages, e.g., the quadrilateral *Language Revival Diamond (LARD)*, featuring four core revivalistic quadrants: language custodians, linguistics, education, and the public sphere. With regard to the public domain, the book promotes *Native Tongue Title*, financial compensation for linguicide (language killing), as well as declaring Indigenous tongues the official languages of their region, and erecting multilingual signs, thus changing the *langscape* (linguistic landscape).

Zuckermann outlines two practical examples of righting the wrongs of the past: (1) using written sources to help the Barnjarla people of Eyre Peninsula (South Australia) to reconnect with their own Aboriginal heritage, spirituality, and language; and (2) using technology to assist Aboriginal people to reconnect with their cultural autonomy, intellectual sovereignty, spirituality, and wellbeing through the free *Barnjarla Aboriginal Language Dictionary App*.¹

Where many language documentation efforts in Australia and elsewhere have been merged with reclamation or revival projects in a posthoc approach that could be characterised as 'begin with high art [grammar and hardcore linguistics] and then make it digestible for the people [beginners' guides, lexicons, and actual language teaching]', Zuckermann advocates for a more bottom-up vision. He suggests that getting dirty, being imperfect, and doing one's best is all that one can do in practical language revival. These lessons

¹ available via Google Play at: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.regren8.dictionary.barnjarla&hl=en&gl=US> - and through <https://www.barnjarla.com/>.

have been learned through personal hardships beginning in the Middle East, a location of intense language politics, and relocation to Australia, where doing linguistics in a late modern, neoliberal university system can be tough. Where Zuckermann at times might appear to cut corners in terms of what many linguists would consider to be doing proper historical linguistics, language documentation, and language teaching, *Revivalistics* as a volume, and revivalistics as a nascent field of research, are bold in their possibilities and futures.

3. Giacon: *Yaluu*

Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay are closely related languages from the north of New South Wales, Australia. While these languages have dramatically declined in use since the 19th century, they are now being reused by many Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay people in a variety of ways. John Giacon's 470-page volume, based in his 2014 PhD thesis, is presented as a basic resource for people working on the rebuilding of the Gamilaraay-Yuwaalaraay languages.

Giacon (2017: 7) sets up his approach to revival and YG [Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay]:

Hybridity is inevitable. Revived YG will be a hybrid of traditional YG and English. The degree of English in revived YG can be influenced by the material available about traditional YG and by the effort put into learning the traditional language. Any features of traditional YG that are clearly stated can potentially be part of rebuilt YG. Any features that are not explicitly stated, taught and well learnt will not be part of rebuilt YG unless they also happen to be part of English.

He uses this position to justify writing a grammatical analysis of a language being revived in that such a document gives people the option to maintain more of their traditional language. Not having substantial analysis potentially limits the available options to revive languages, with a likely outcome being a variety of relexified English. Here Giacon puts forward several possibilities presented to the linguist and community language worker in order to maintain features of the traditional language, as well as the impact of various revival pathways, and how the contextualising of grammar is key.

This book expands on previous grammatical description of these two languages, building on a wide range of sources, including materials from the mid-19th century, and audio recordings from the 1970s. It sheds additional light on their grammars by using a growing body of typological research on (related) Pama-Nyungan languages, as well as descriptive work on

neighbouring languages, in particular Wangaaybuwan, which along with Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay, Wayilwan, and Wiradjuri forms the Central New South Wales subgroup of Pama-Nyungan languages (Austin 1997). Here there should be much for both the formal typologist and committed historical linguist to get their teeth into.

The grammar encompasses the main structural features of YG, including simple and complex clause structures, and nominal and verbal morphology, which include a number of distinctive affixes. Interrogatives, negatives, indefinites, and ignoratives are all given air, along with details of nominalisation and a hitherto not yet fully described set of demonstratives.

Giacon does well to outline details of YG verbs, including time-of-day suffixes (morning, afternoon, and night), and distance-in-time suffixes which subdivide the past, a pattern that is common in south-eastern Australia, e.g. Diyari and Yandruwandha of northern South Australia. The subdivision of the future in YG has not been widely reported, however, and is unusual cross-linguistically. Included is the first description of the middle verb forms, which have a range of case frames. The volume includes an Appendix, which contains background Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay material and data from other languages.

4. Conclusions and future

Reviewing these two volumes in tandem demonstrates where priorities for several decades have been in Australian and worldwide historical linguistics, documentary linguistics, and language revitalisation. Where Giacon presents the required historical and grammatical bases of the languages about which he writes, building on a long tradition of grammar-writing focussed primarily on (the) language, Zuckermann (202: xxiii) takes a different path: “I prefer revivalistics than documentary linguistics as only the former puts the *speakers* — rather than the *language* — at the centre”. Here we see a significant about-face in research foci in writing about languages, going from grammar to the speakers of the languages themselves. We should remember the etymology of ‘grammar’ is via Latin from Greek *grammatikē* (*tekhne*) ‘(art) of letters’, from *gramma*, *grammat-* ‘letter of the alphabet, thing written’. Where Giacon astutely lays bare the nuts and bolts of Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay as historical linguistic artefacts which can be interpreted technically and then possibly used for and by speakers, Zuckermann uses humour, especially his addenda to Maslow’s (1987 [1943]) hierarchy of needs, namely [mobile phone] battery and wi-fi, as a call to ask about where he believes the future of the theory and practice of *doing language* or *linguaging* (*sleeping or whatever*) *languages into reality* in terms of enabling speakers to imbibe these ways of speaking into their own being.

One minor quibble and question of contention is Zuckermann's use of glossonyms. He suggests that the language of Israel should be called 'Israeli' and not 'Hebrew', because it is a substantially different variety with different language-based, social, and religious contexts. Should not, then, modern Barngarla, in a spirit of accuracy in its differing modern settings also have a new name to reflect these new circumstances beyond his suggestion of Neo-Barngarla? (cf. Giacon's "revived YG")

An important question both of these works emphasise is where does a bottom-up revival go, and how can it function in the world? Giacon argues that without an understanding of traditional languages, which he believes only comes through grammatical analysis, a common result is very simple relexified English in varieties which are emblematic but not communicative. The actual, long-term linguistic and social results of Zuckermann's work on Barngarla, though obviously longitudinal and socially-engaged, remain to be seen as regards to how his bottom-up approach culminates in the amount of Barngarla in use, in what contexts, and how traditional or hybridised it is.

One could easily critique Zuckermann's claims that he is taking the moral highground by claiming revivalistics and *Native Tongue Title* put speakers and their social and spiritual connection to language, country, and people above the technical bits of language espoused by writers like Giacon. However, a deeper reading of Zuckermann's personal treatise in light of Giacon's methodical exposé of grammatical description and language revival and rebuilding reveal something else. The former believes and has practical experience which lead him to conclude that the impenetrable grammars, academic articles, and books are not as imperative as empowering speakers to enable and teach themselves. The latter has written, also based on extensive practical experience, what is arguably one such impenetrable grammar, a document few laypeople with an interest in the Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay languages would be able to access intellectually.

This is where the present state of an 'it's-almost-impossible-to-do-linguistic fieldwork-during-Covid' exposes a differing set of priorities for the Giacon-Zuckermann contrast: historical and documentary work like Giacon's *is* required, lest there be no resources with which to work to create the grammars and the lexica from which more applicable and approachable resources are constructed, ready made for speakers to use. Revivalist work like Zuckermann's depends largely on sources such as early salvage grammars and lexicons of Aboriginal languages by missionaries and anthropologists, and more recent specialist grammatical writing on Israeli or revived Australian Aboriginal languages to provide the necessary initial resources to speakers of the languages which are being revived.

What we see in the Giacon-Zuckermann contrast is more like a dialectic. Rather than two sides of the same coin, they converse with and inform each other. Himmelman's and Dixon's documentary-descriptive linguistics accomplished great work and heralded much that is new in terms of our

understanding of how languages are structured and function. Let us take this ‘how-languages-work’-ness and combine it with a more speaker-focused, Zuckermann-espoused, revivalist method to see what the future of a documentary-cum-speaker-centric linguistics may entail. The study of language revival is not only an important element of language documentation research, but also a highly emotional, and understudied realm of the politics of language and personhood and self within linguistics. As such, Zuckermann’s and Giacon’s works, both separately and together, emphasise elements of the need to document, theorise, make scientific, and hustle socially and politically about the means and ends of doing revivalistics, revival linguistics, and writing revival grammars.

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