

COMPARATIVE ESSAY

Language Revitalization in Brazil and Wales

Introduction

Language is often thought of as simply being a method of communication. It is a way to transmit collective memory, cultural values, and identity. However, across the world, languages are becoming extinct because they become forgotten unpracticed or died out with the last people who conserved their knowledge. It is this idea that the language needs to be lived and used that makes it into an essential part of heritage. This essay explores the way language functions as the medium for cultural identity through the concept of intangible heritage. To illustrate the argument, we will explore two case studies: Indigenous Languages in Brazil (from the native groups on the Brazilian territory, prior to colonisation) and the Welsh language in Wales (as one of the only remaining Celtic languages still used in everyday life). Many of Brazil's Indigenous languages are facing extinction and marginalization, while Wales has been successful in revitalizing the language.

The essay will connect several heritage and language revitalization theories to understand the connection between language, national identity, and heritage preservation. I will use the scholarly works of Harrison (2007), Hobsbawm (1996), Anderson ((1983), and Bucholtz and Hall (2004) to explain that language contributes to constructing identity. The essay weaves concepts of intangible heritage as discussed by Ruggles and Silverman (2009) and Harrison and Rose (2010) about language revitalization that should be considered as being essential. With the comparative aspect, the essay will show how political context deeply influences the potential for language revitalization and their preservation. We will demonstrate that states can be both an enhancing tool and a suppressor in terms of supporting these languages and maintaining language diversity. Lastly, it discusses reframing national identity and celebrating multilingualism.

Theoretical Framework

This essay picks examples from diverse works in order to explore how language shapes identity and serves as a form of intangible heritage. The base of that theory lies in the fact that language is a grounded practice, one that builds a collective identity. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) indicate how language practices build identity through interaction, rather than just reflecting a fixed self. This is important for minor and indigenous groups, where language use can confirm a collective past and be resistant to dominance.

Anderson's (1983) idea of the “imagined community” refers that nations are a social construct through shared practices, such as language. Common language drives individuals to think of themselves as part of a larger group, reinforcing boundaries. So in this situation, language is a concept made to serve the national identity. Similarly, Hobsbawm (1996) goes further and argues that national identity is selectively constructed through many cultural factors. However, it also shows that putting a national language forward may come at the expense of a minor one. It is a dynamic of exclusion with patterns recognized in both the use of Welsh and many Brazilian Indigenous languages alike, even though their contexts are widely different. The perspective of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) adds a layer to the conversation. Ruggles and Silverman (2009), and in accordance with the UNESCO definition. ICH involves knowledge and idioms that are passed down from generation to generation. Language is alive. It's about stories and the way people interact with one another. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage highlights community participation but lacks the persistence to conduct operations within nations. Braber and Howard (2023) argue that language is not just heritage but the most important medium to transmit all other intangible cultural heritage. To explain that idea, losing the language would be equal to losing an entire culture, as it lacks the appropriate and original language to communicate it. The idiom “lost in translation” is the best way to communicate that idea. Romaine (2009) and Blommaert (2006) both warn against this importance, highlighting that language policy needs to recognize heterogeneity and its inner movements in the quest to identity. Harrison (2007) adds to the conversation that the loss of language is a global crisis with epistemological consequences, as every language traps their own knowledge. He writes, “When we lose a language, we lose centuries of human thinking about time, seasons, sea creatures, edible flowers, landscapes, numbers, myths, music, and the unknown of the everyday.”

Case Study: Indigenous Languages in Brazil

The language map of Brazil is shaped by colonial history and the various policies of the government and its tense relationship towards indigenous rights. As of 2023, the estimations were that 180-190 Indigenous languages were still spoken across the country, many of which are severely endangered (Drude et al., 2023). The suppression of Indigenous languages is not meant to be done but is a reflection of cultural marginalization and is reinforced through the education and political system.

According to Harrison (2007), the death of a language is representative of a loss of words but also an entire system of knowledge. In Brazil, the slow extinction of indigenous languages results in a form of violence, with some unique knowledge of the world, including medicinal knowledge and thoughts on ecology and oral histories, being lost. He adds that “each language reflects a unique way of understanding human experience”

(2007, p.5). Thus, preserving a language is a way of preserving knowledge itself. Guilherme (2014) agrees with Harrison's (2007) account of language preservation, arguing that the different Amazonian communities use language to reinforce the sense of community and fight against assimilation. And this has been the principal finding so far: language goes above simple communication; it is a central part of oneself or within a group. The education system in Brazil is historically known for cultural assimilation. Goncalves et al. (2015) discusses that schools have often served as a tool of forced integration, where Indigenous children were taught Portuguese and discouraged from using their own languages. This phenomenon is like the Welsh case study, which will be discussed further below. This is a common early European colonial practice, where the use of education served to dominate culturally. It is even suggested that there are intercultural projects; they are inconsistent and severely underfunded. Guillerme (2015) critiques the distinction between "contacted" and "non-contacted" groups in the different policies. This separatory idea clouds the nuances between indigenous groups that are very different from each other and require different needs in terms of revitalization or preservation. Despite the challenges, language revitalization is on the rise in Brazil. Facundes et al. (2020) discusses the efforts of the Apurinã for their revival of their language through community-based projects. But they often rely on elders for transmission and are a success by their own merit and not because of government assistance for their revitalization efforts. Considering Harrison's (2007) concerns about the language diversity and the loss of knowledge, the Brazilian case illustrates the stakes involved in language loss. If we are not consistent and us in our effort, revitalization will remain a considerable challenge. The case also reveals community resilience and the creative ways to preserve this side of culture despite all the obstacles that are systematically on the path.

Case Study: Welsh Language in Wales

Unlike the Brazilian case, the Welsh language is one that is consistently discussed and supported, one of its kind when thinking of language revitalization in Europe. But that does not mean that it was an easy journey, marked by suppression and resistance. The "Welsh Not" policy of the 19th century is the primary symbol of the suppression of Welsh in schools. Johnes (2024) discusses that children were punished when they spoke the language by wearing a block, or a token, made of wood, called the Welsh Not. The suppression of the language reflects the efforts to Anglicize the Welsh population. He also further refers to the psychological and cultural impact of the policies on the population. This led to a decline in the language. Brooks (2017) explores how the 20th-century nationalist sentiment in Wales spruced up in opposition to the linguistic erasure. The movement is not as significant as in other parts of the British Isles, but it is significant nonetheless. Therefore, we can recognize the language to be a "symbolic marker" of the

Welsh culture and sense of identity, even for those who may not be fluent or cannot practice it. Anderson (1983) adds that the idea of “imagined community,” where shared practices such as language aid the forging of collective national identity. In the middle of the 20th century, the Welsh language made a significant institutional recovery. There has been the establishment of a Welsh language school, the government becoming bilingual, and the creation of a Welsh language TV channel. All of those have contributed to the revitalization of the language. Williams (2014) has referred to this process as a “lightning veil” of revitalization, and it has shed the weight of the historical suppression while still grappling with integration challenges. He has observed, “Revitalization is not merely about increasing speaker numbers but about embedding the language in everyday life and civic structures” (2014, p. 260). Mackie (2018) has noticed that the different policies about the Welsh language have their own risks. The Cymraeg 2050 strategy aimed to have 1,000,000 Welsh speakers by the middle of the century and has prioritized the quality and the depth of language use. Mackie has further argued that the revitalization of the language has to be guided by different cultural considerations and the advice of the community and not only targets. The language is also deeply tied to any of the places in the Welsh context. Rhys Jones, in *Place and Identity*, has argued that the speaking of Welsh is often seen as a way of placing themselves in a particular community. Segrott (2001) has also studied Welsh speakers in London who have used the language as a form of resistance against cultural assimilation. Bourhis, Giles, and Tajfel (1973) depicted how language is used to reinforce identity, especially under conditions of perceived threat or minority status.

Comparative analysis

The comparison between Brazil and Wales has revealed complex interplay between language, power, and identity in different localizations. While both countries have faced historical suppressions of some of their minority languages, both revitalization projects have differed significantly due to state policies, activism, and national discourse. In Brazil, indigenous languages have been treated as a remnant of a past. This view has contributed to the marginalization of the indigenous communities in the educational system and culture. As Goncalez has observed, indigenous schooling efforts have failed many times to reflect different linguistic realities of the communities and have reinforced this assimilation logic (p. 5). It is true that the state has committed to intercultural education but continues to primarily function as an essentially Portuguese-speaking country. This is a drastic contrast to Wales, where the government has actively promoted bilingualism. Therefore, the common denominator of these true case studies is the implication of the nation-state. In Wales, the Welsh language has been embraced as a symbol of cultural nationalism. Williams (2021) discusses that Welsh is, quotation mark, not just a means of communication, but a declaration of who we are, and quotation mark,

showing that the language is potent in its symbolism and articulating national identity (page 212). This has boosted revitalization efforts, such as the Cymraeg 2050 strategy. On the other hand, in Brazil, indigenous identity is often dispersed and externally defined through state policies. As Luiz Costa (2016) argues, even though the well-intentioned governmental institutions like FUNAI can accidentally replicate colonial patterns, where indigenous communities are seen as needing protection rather than being capable of agencing their own cultural continuity. In Brazil, revitalization has often been dependent on local initiatives and are not supported by the state. For instance, Shulist (2016) has depicted how indigenous communities in urban zones of the Amazonia are reclaiming public events as linguistic space. In contrast, Welsh communities have benefited from government support, easing the revitalization process. Despite these differences, the parallel is important to look at. Both Brazil and Wales show tensions between the symbolic and functional use of language. In Brazil, speaking an indigenous language often marks one as 'other', and 'other' is disconnected from the mainstream economy. Similarly, in Wales, Tristram (2007) has noted that while Welsh has been revitalized, there are many English speakers who have viewed it as impractical or exclusionary to English speakers. She writes, "Why Don't The English Speak Welsh?" encapsulates the power dynamics in language perceptions within the UK (p.193). Both contexts show that the revival of language is not merely a technical issue but also one that challenges the assumption on society. Finally, as Blommaert (2006) argued, language policy must move beyond state rules and has to be more accommodating to multilingualism in this global reality. This means the recognition of language not only as heritage but as dynamic, living practice embedded in social everyday life.

Conclusion

This essay has explored how language functions as both the reflection and the construction of cultural identity with a focus on case studies such as indigenous languages in Brazil and the Welsh language in Wales. It has drawn on theoretical work from scholars such as Bucholtz and Hall (2004), Anderson (1983), and Harrison (2007), with the analysis showing that language is not simply a medium of communication but a powerful means of identity memory and resistance.

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