This book will help the reader understand why languages die or become endangered and some possible ways of reviving dying languages or preventing their death. If you are interested in learning about language endangerment and/or language preservation, consider buying this book.

This book is an edited volume of chapters contributed by multiple authors. There are three chapters devoted to studying the effects of educational policies (chapters 2–4). There are three chapters devoted to studying the effects of revitalization (chapters 5–7). Finally there are five chapters devoted to studying the effects of sociohistorical processes (chapters 8–12).

Chapter One is an introduction and summary of the rest of the book.

In Chapter Two, Heidi A. Orcutt-Gachiri, working in Kenya, shows that the unintended effect of the role of English and Kiswahili in the exam-oriented school setting is that indigenous languages are disadvantaged by their lack of representation in the educational system. However, Orcutt-Gachiri contradicted herself when she said, “The mission schools demanded a complete break with African culture from its members,” but then observed, “…however they did use local vernaculars as the medium of instruction and were instrumental in creating literacy in many Kenyan languages.” It seemed to me that the mission schools were trying to preserve the local cultures if they were promoting literacy and language use in the vernacular languages. Perhaps Orcutt-Gachiri meant to say that the British government (rather than the mission schools) demanded a complete break with African culture from its members (p. 17).

In Chapter Three, Olga Kazakevich, working in Siberia and the Far East, shows that for the 35 minority languages still in use today, the teaching of these languages has had very little effect on preserving these languages. She says this is due to the fact that the teachers themselves are often unable to speak the indigenous languages that they teach. She observes that the crucial point in language preservation activities is elevating the prestige of the endangered language, especially in the eyes of the younger generation (p. 36). In a separate point, she adds, “The most destructive prejudice against minority languages, which is widespread both inside and outside minority
ethnic groups, including educational authorities (as our survey showed), is the idea that learning
the language of the majority, which gives access to education, professional career, and
prosperity, is possible only by abandoning the ancestral language (Orcutt-Gachiri, this volume).”
When I double-checked the chapter by Orcutt-Gachiri that Kazakevich referred to, I found that
Orcutt-Gachiri has the same opinion as Kazakevich but I could not find any survey data that
supports the claim of Kazakevich. Moreover, both Landweer (this volume) and Sicoli (this
volume) disagree with Kazakevich’s claim that people decide to abandon their heritage language
in order to achieve certain benefits and they provide actual documentation regarding why
Kazakevich’s claim is incorrect.

In Chapter Four, Lynn Landweer, working in Papua New Guinea, collected a lot of scholarly
data that shows that heritage language speakers have decided to maintain their language, even
though it is an endangered language and even though they and their children are schooled in an
ex-colonial language. She concluded her study by saying that language planners should foster an
environment that encourages the use of the vernacular in extracurricular domains, even as they
pursue the development of vernacular literature, literacy, and education programs.

In Chapter Five, Paula Meyer and Jon Meza Cuero, working with the Kumeyaay language in
Tecate, Baja California, saw that the appropriate unit for language revitalization was the family
rather than the community. One small language learning group was established with Mr. Meza as
the group leader. One of the unanswered questions related to this chapter is: Are the Kumeyaay
language learners in Mr. Meza’s group communicating with each other (and their teacher) in
Kumeyaay yet? If so, this effort would be deemed to be successful.

In Chapter Six, Marie-France Patte, working with the Anun people in Venezuela, notes that an
unintended consequence of the expansion of the oil industry was the pollution of the water
supply and the loss of land by the Anun. Before this happened, the language was widely spoken.
Patte said that the language was declared extinct in the 1970s (p. 77). She talked about using
certain oral narratives to preserve the language but she didn’t say how many native speakers
could understand these oral narratives. The author ends the chapter with some good news.
UNICEF is now collaborating with the Anun people to support their efforts to preserve their
language.

In Chapter Seven, Melissa Rinehart, working with the Miami speakers in America, states that
language experts must understand what community members think about the language and must
understand the sociohistorical context in which a language shifts. Only then can revitalization
efforts become successful. The Miami language was threatened when Miami children were
required to attend English-speaking boarding schools, and then the Ku Klux Klan (or KKK)
began to threaten all non-white populations. Both of these efforts caused a drastic reduction in
Miami language use.

In Chapter Eight, Barbara Hoffman, working in Togo with the Igo, notes that Paramount Chief
Gassou IV was able to use the influence of his chieftaincy as a position from which to advocate
for the community’s language. Chief Gassou stressed that parents should teach their children
their mother tongue and stated that the lingua franca, Ewe, should be complementary to Igo,
rather than a replacement of Igo.
In Chapter Nine, Tania Granadillo, working in two villages in Venezuela on Kurripako, shows that Christianity has had a significant impact on promoting vernacular language use of the Kurripako language. She gave two examples, the Yavinape family and the Yusuino family. The Yavinape family live in La Experanza. The father of the Yavinape family is the founder of his village and also one of the pastors of the church. Although he is bilingual, he insists on using Kurripako in the church services (p. 143). As a family, they make an effort to speak Kurripako in as many situations as possible. Thus this family shows how individual choices can override macrostructural forces. The second example is that of the Yusuino family who live in Victorino. The church in Victorino also uses the Kurripako language, perhaps due to the influence of the Yusuino family. Granadillo noted (p. 138) that evangelical hymns were broadcast through the PA system in the village but she didn’t say whether the hymns were in Kurripako or Spanish. Since the church services are in Kurripako, I am assuming that the hymns were also in Kurripako.

In Chapter Ten, Lars von Karstedt, working on the German island of Amrun, or Oomran, showed that the consequence of the beauty of the island as a tourist location, combined with the free-market real estate pricing, has disrupted the Oomrang-speaking community on that island. The original Oomrang-speaking residents of that island can no longer afford to live there due to skyrocketing real estate prices. Another factor is the demographic factor: during peak season in the summer months, the number of tourists (who generally don’t speak Oomrang) outweighs the number of native Oomrang-speaking residents by a ratio of almost 10:1. This has caused the Oomran people to begin to lose the language.

In Chapter Eleven, Mark Sicoli, studying Zapotec in Oaxaca, Mexico, disagrees with the prevailing conception of language shift (which Sicoli attributes to analytic biases, p. 161) which says that speakers choose to give up one language for another, achieving personal gain (such as economic advantage) for this exchange (Grenoble and Whaley 1998:22). He was surprised to find that the most remote mountain towns he visited had all shifted to Spanish but that more central towns had maintained Zapotec. We would normally expect the opposite: that a community’s remoteness would help maintain traditional practices like language reproduction. The unexpected happened because parents in these areas acted together to oppose the idea of Spanish monolingualism at home and support the idea of bilingualism in the community (p. 173). Sicoli rightly observes that acts that change and sustain language use in a society (boarding schools, government policy toward minority languages, discrimination, relocation, and other factors) are situated in the social and cultural matrices of which individuals are a part, rather than solely in individuals’ free will. It is problematic to assume monolingualism is a natural human state and it is problematic to assume that most people prefer and choose to be monolingual. Most of the world’s population is multilingual. Unfortunately, some Spanish language teachers in Mexico do still believe, and publically express, that bilingualism harms children’s abilities to learn Spanish, but, fortunately, this seems to be a minority opinion (p. 174).

In Chapter Twelve, Heidi Altman, working in North Carolina on the Cherokee language, learned that the government policy that had the most significant impact on language shift was the establishment of Indian boarding schools (p. 181). As with other Native American boarding schools, children were removed from their homes and placed in boarding schools where their native language was forbidden and where the English language was imposed on them. This governmental policy and practice caused a drastic decrease in the use of the Cherokee language.
Language endangerment and language shift impact many of us as field linguists. Therefore this book, and others like it, would be relevant for linguists who are working in such situations. If we are involved in language policy, we would do well to explain to government policy makers and government decision makers that multilingualism is the norm in this world, not the exception (p. 162).

References