Developing a tool to assess language vitality

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Motivation

To develop a standardised assessment tool that

• provides an informed overview of linguistic vitality
• balances global applicability with local appropriateness
• permits
  – rigorous comparisons between sites
  – evaluation of intergenerational transmission of linguistic and other Indigenous knowledge
  – analysis of how linguistic ability varies according to sociolinguistic factors such as age / generation, gender, religious affiliation, special roles
Frameworks for assessing language status

• **Fishman 1991** *Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS)* — 1 (safe) - 8 (extinct) point scale that focuses on the key role of intergenerational transmission in the maintenance of a language

• **Lewis and Simons 2010** *Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS)* — 13 levels on 0 (international) -10 (extinct) scale with some (a) and (b): e.g. 8a moribund 8b nearly extinct
Frameworks for assessing language status

- **UNESCO 2003** — 9 indicators of language vitality on a 0 (extinct) - 5 (safe) 6-point scale:
  - Linguistic vitality and state of endangerment (6 indicators)
  - Language attitudes (2 indicators)
  - Amount and quality of documentation

  - Intergenerational language transmission
  - Number of speakers
  - Proportion of speakers
  - Domains and functions of use
Existing frameworks

- Widely used internationally
- Provide broad-picture indications of vitality across regions / countries / language families
- Useful for reports, policy-makers, raising awareness

Methodological drawbacks
- relies on observation and self-report rather than empirical evidence
- Not standardised in method or terminology (for viability, speaker fluency, etc.)
- Therefore comparisons between sites and situations are difficult
Language Vitality Test

• Development of a protocol consisting of three tasks that test receptive, productive and creative abilities

• Timeline
  – 1990’s – protocol first developed to compare linguistic vitality in three Alune language sites in Eastern Indonesia
  – 2000’s – used in four language communities in Central Maluku. Results primarily analysed for receptive ability
  – In 2012 – adapted for use with the Sri Lankan Malay community. Method developed for analysing and quantifying productive ability
Task 1: Lexical recognition

• Designed to test **receptive ability**
• Participants shown five sets of around 10 photos each with images ranging from common objects to people and activities
Task 1: Lexical recognition

- Designed to test receptive vocabulary
- Participants shown five sets of around 10 photos each depicting ranging from common objects to people and activities
- Task 1: Lexical recognition
Task 1: Lexical recognition

• Designed to test **receptive ability**
• Participants shown five sets of around 10 photos each with images ranging from common objects to people and activities
• Tester talks about the images to make sure the content is clear to the participant
• Hear recording in the TL with short descriptions and they choose the picture being described
Task 1: Lexical recognition

- Designed to test receptive ability
- Participants shown five sets of around 10 photos each, from common objects to people and activities
- Tester talks about the images to make sure the content is clear to the participant
- Hears recording with short descriptions and they choose the picture being described
Task 1: Lexical recognition

• No productive language skills necessary
• Can include all members of the community
• Aims to be low stress for participants
  – test is not timed
  – participants can stop at any point
• Scored quickly on a right-wrong basis
Task 1: Lexical recognition

• An efficient way to get a global picture of language proficiency
• Ascertain whether generational transmission failure – that is, linguistic tip (Dorian 1981) – is taking place
• Compare broad differences in linguistic vitality between language communities
Task 2: Translation

• Designed to test **productive ability**
• Only participants who have scored well on Lexical Recognition move on to translation (e.g. 66% correct)
• Consists of progressively more complex sentences recorded in the language of wider communication
Task 2: Translation

- Participants listen to recording and translate orally into the target language
- Participants can stop at any time (or administrator can end the test at any time)
- Scoring is more complicated
  - must be done separately
  - requires listening to recorded test, transcription and analysis
Task 2: Translation

• Identify finer-grained differences within and between communities
• Determine speaker groups according to shared linguistic features, e.g.
  – word order
  – loanwords
  – innovative grammar
• Identify conservative and emerging varieties
Task 3: Extended discourse

- Designed to test **creative ability**
- Only respondents who are at ease with Task 2 move on to Task 3
- Respondents are asked to produce extended, spontaneous language
Task 3: Extended discourse

• Prompts may include:

Photos selected from the lexical recognition task displayed as triggers. Respondent is asked to talk in the TL for a short while about the scene, or to make up a story.
Task 3: Extended discourse

- Prompts may include:

  Respondent asked to talk about some important past event in their life.
  Respondent asked to engage in a discussion with the test administrator on a topic of interest.
Task 3: Extended discourse

• Results are difficult to quantify
• Probably not so useful for statistical analysis
• Allows us to identify fluent and creative speakers
Maluku, eastern Indonesia
Lexical recognition results in 4 sites

G1-G2 *p* in Allang (89%>65%) & Rutah (90%>66%)

G2-G4 *p* continues in Allang (65%>49%>31%) & Rutah (66%>41%>30%)

Gradual shift in LohiaS: G3-G4 (95%>89%>81%)

Gradual shift in Tulehu: G3-G4a (95%>83%)

Tip in Tulehu: G4a-G4b (83%>50%)
4 speaker groups based on receptive ability

- Fluent speakers
- Semi speakers
- Passive bilinguals
- Non speakers

% correct responses

Generation:
- ≥ 50 (G1)
- 30-49 (G2)
- 18-29 (G3)
- High School (G4a)
- Primary School (G4b)
Sample translation task results

Sentence 3
"I didn't go" [negation]

Ambonese Malay elicitation sentence
Beta seng pigi
1s NEG go

KEY: village, gender, age

Alune target response
Au 'eu mo
1s go NEG

Speaker Group 1:
matches fluent speaker norm

Au pergi mo
1s go.MAL NEG [LS f8]

Speaker Group 2:
Alune word order with Malay loan

Au pigi mo
1s go.MAL NEG [Mrtn m10]

Speaker Group 3:
Malay word order, Malay lexemes, Alune marked only with 1s pronoun

Au tidak pigi
1s NEG.MAL go.MAL [LT m9]
Sri Lankan Malay
Sri Lankan Malay
Sri Lankan Malay

Central Province
pop: 2,889

Strong community, conservative language use, strong sense of Sri Lankan Malay identity tied to the language.
Sri Lankan Malay

Small community, integrating with Tamil speaking Muslim community, low socio-economic status.
Sri Lankan Malay

Includes tight-knit Malay community of Kirinda, where all age groups still speak the language regularly.
Sri Lankan Malay

Mixed population: Upper class elites speak English as their first language. An historically tight-knit and linguistically conservative lower class community is now dispersing into the larger non-Malay population.
Results of Task 1 show tip
Results of Task 2 are varied

• Three key features were analysed:
  – Vocabulary
  – Tense, aspect, modality marking
  – Case marking
Example responses

‘I went to the garden.’

See *kubbong* na *yēng* *pii*.
1s garden to PAST go

See *luuwar* na *yēng* *pii*.
1s outside to PAST go

**Paraphrase strategy**
Example responses

‘I went to the garden.’

See *kubbong na yëng pii.*
1s garden to PAST go

See *garden na yëng pii.*
1s garden.ENG to PAST go

**Code-switching strategy**
Vocabulary production by age
Vocabulary production by age and province

![Graph showing vocabulary production by age and province]
Tense, aspect and modality markers by age and province
Case marking by age and province
Usefulness of Task 2

- Use as a micro tool to identify areas for focusing language work
- A clearer image of complex patterns of variation across age groups and communities
- Results and possible applications will vary depending on the language and the particular community scenario
Combining receptive and productive ability

• Combining results from receptive (lexical recognition) and productive (translation) tasks allows the researcher to refine speaker/non-speaker groups based on:
  – productive knowledge of the lexicon
  – shared innovations (word order, grammatical features, use of loans)

• distinguishes primarily between higher scoring groups (≥ 80%) where strong receptive ability need not correlate with strong productive ability
5 speaker groups— receptive & productive ability
Methodological Applications

• Lexical recognition test can be used over a number of language communities
• Provides quick and useful overview of linguistic vitality
• Test protocol does not require linguistic training
• Test protocol can be run by community members, which can reduce stress of test taking
Practical Applications

• Raise awareness in the community and beyond of language vitality and language shift / loss
• Assess language maintenance needs
• Develop locally-appropriate language learning materials
• Identify language teachers and masters through creative use of the target language over a range of genres
• Highlight the urgency for documentation of these languages and need for training
• Strengthen arguments for funding
Materials

• Our photo sets and translation sentences are available at:

www.rnld.org/lvt
References


