What are the ways in which local variables and ideologies interact with larger norms and movements in language maintenance and revitalization? The edited volume *Re-awakening languages: Theory and practice in the revitalisation of Australia’s Indigenous languages* provides several possible answers to this question through its 34 chapters of theoretical discussions and case studies from Australia. Diverse in its authorship and ideas, this book is a valuable and welcome contribution for people involved with language revitalization, whether they be theoretically focused, interested in policy, situated in community contexts—or as with most contributors to this volume, in some combination of these areas. Pervasive in the book is a sense of passion, with many of the authors reporting on years of work in language programs, and articulating a firm belief in the value of those efforts. This passion and dedication make the book a pleasure to read, but its real strengths lie in its diverse case studies and many insights on how to more effectively structure, promote, and assess language revitalization.

To fully appreciate *Re-awakening languages* requires an awareness of the changing norms of endangered language theory and language revitalization. The editors explain that both the structure of this book and the motivation for creating it stem from the well-known earlier work *The green book of language revitalization in practice* (Hinton & Hale 2001), which they note has been so influential that it is sometimes referred to locally as ‘the Bible’ (xxvi). The influence of *The green book* is clear. Beyond its similar structure, *Re-awakening languages* is similarly diverse in its authorship, and like *The green book*, takes the need for language revitalization to be self-evident and goes directly into the details of doing it. However, it also has some differences. Beyond its focus on Australia and references to events and literature after *The green book*’s publication, the chapters in *Re-awakening languages* also reflect and reinforce changing norms in language revitalization over the last ten years. First, in line with increasingly common practice, they devote significant discus-
sion to collaboration and to the roles of various stakeholders in language efforts. Second, these essays engage in a more recent practice of deconstructing the assumptions of revitalization by explicitly recognizing how the success of a given language effort is grounded in the ecology of that language and in the needs of its heritage community. As many authors report on languages without fluent speakers or significant documentation, this becomes important; fluency is just one of many possible goals.

I write on this last issue in a way that is informed by my own background. I come from a community whose language (Miami) was called ‘extinct’ because it had no speakers for a period of about thirty years, and was often still referenced in this way even after significant reclamation from documentation had taken place (Leonard 2008, 2011). Members of my community who were involved in the initial stages of Miami reclamation during the 1990s report that others—particularly linguists—often expressed little confidence in the possibility or value of reclamation without speakers, noting that parts of the language probably could not be fully reclaimed. Similarly, I have been asked, “What’s the point?” Re-awakening languages is one of a growing number of works that illustrate how such thinking is outdated and inappropriate. Its essays avoid, and in many cases critique, the idea that success is attained only if a given language is spoken fluently, newly learned as a first language, and used in every domain. (In particular, see Chapter 30.) Rather, many authors focus on the importance of language programs for bestowing prestige upon a language and fostering a positive sense of cultural identity within its heritage community.

The editors note that part of the agreement associated with the publication of this book was that it would be made available online for free. Each chapter has its own references, and most introduce and define terminology as it is used within the context of the chapter. In this way, the book is very accessible and works well for those who wish to consult only certain parts or to read the chapters out of order. However, my suggestion is that readers always start with the Foreword (xi–xii), written by Aboriginal scholar Jeanie Bell, and the Introduction (xxv–xxx), co-authored by all four editors. For ease of presentation, I am organizing my comments around the seven parts into which the volume is structured, and for length reasons, I am focusing my discussion on selected themes and topics that I think will be of most interest to readers of Language Documentation & Conservation. However, along with the parts mentioned above, I suggest that all readers consult the table of contents and the ‘About the authors’ section (which has 48 entries)—not just as references, but also as worthwhile reading in themselves. They illustrate the diversity in topics and authorship that make Re-awakening languages strong.

The three chapters of Part One, ‘Language policy and planning,’ introduce themes that underlie the rest of Re-awakening languages. In Chapter 1, ‘Closing the policy-practice gap: making Indigenous language policy more than empty rhetoric,’ Adriano Truscott and Ian Malcolm cover two topics that facilitate an understanding of the rest of the book. First is their overview of language policy in Australia, which they argue has largely been framed around prioritizing verbal and written fluency in Standard Australian English. Second is the authors’ differentiation of visible and invisible language policy—the former being overtly specified rules or guides that are framed around language use, and the latter being the actual effects of government policy on language use. They observe that visible policies, no matter how pro-Indigenous language use they might be, are always implemented in a larger social context that usually elevates Standard Australian English above other languages, and
hence must be analyzed in terms of the ensuing invisible policies. Michael Walsh continues this discussion in Chapter 2, ‘Why language revitalisation sometimes works,’ in which he highlights common traits of ‘successful’ language programs. In addition to commonly referenced variables such as community control, empowerment, and cultural awareness, Walsh includes “access to linguistic expertise” (29) in his list, and notes that he is unaware of any language revitalization programs that have been successful without it. In making this point, he enters the larger current debate, also referenced elsewhere in this book, about the role of linguistics and of (especially non-indigenous) linguists in language revitalization efforts (see, e.g., the chapters in Part II of Reyhner & Lockard 2009). Finally, Tyson Kaawoppa Yunkaporta’s chapter, ‘Our ways of learning in Aboriginal languages,’ brings cultural integrity in language instruction into the realm of policy and planning. Yunkaporta introduces ‘eight ways of learning’ (38) that provide an interface among land, language, and people. Stemming from Indigenous research in New South Wales, these ways—each accompanied by a specific example—are compelling and useful for designing new indigenous language pedagogy and curriculum. It’s noteworthy that the editors put Yunkaporta’s chapter in the ‘Policy and planning’ section of the book rather than in its section on education. In doing so, they assert that cultural integrity is a key part of policy and planning, and differentiate themselves from other literature on revitalization, much of which addresses cultural relevance in education but does not frame it in such a primary way.

Part Two, ‘Language in communities’ is similarly noteworthy because it deviates from a common pattern in literature on language revitalization. I initially assumed that ‘community’ would refer to indigenous communities, but of the five chapters that comprise this section, only the last one targets language awareness and revitalization within this narrow definition. The rest devote significant discussion to the ways in which revitalization efforts can enhance language awareness and prestige in the public arena beyond a given language’s heritage community. Knut J. Olawsky’s chapter, ‘Going public with language: involving the wider community in language revitalisation’ (Chapter 6) explores this issue most directly, and I focus my comments here.

Two points raised by Olawsky stand out. First is his assertion that the protectionism that frequently accompanies language endangerment need not prevent the spreading of the language to the wider public. Olawsky illustrates this in his summary of Miriwoong revitalization programs, which include public signage and welcome speeches for local organizations. This public use occurs despite an earlier consensus among Miriwoong elders that the use of the language should focus exclusively on the native community. However, Olawsky demonstrates that the real issue is that such publicity be exercised by the appropriate people and controlled by the native community; it is not about wider public use per se. Given current debates about who has the right to learn and use indigenous languages, this distinction is important. Second, Olawsky provides a useful critique of Joshua Fishman’s model for reversing language shift (1991), which largely operates with the assumption that language revitalization efforts must start at the grassroots level, and only later enter the public domains dominated by the majority language. In contrast, Olawsky argues that “the use of language in public life” (82) should always be considered in revitalization, regardless of the language’s level of endangerment. The three other chapters in Part Two

3 Here, I am following Walsh’s use of scare quotes around ‘successful.’
also support this point through Kaurna names in public (Chapter 4), the promotion of Wir-adjuri among Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the schools of Parkes, New South Wales (Chapter 5), and the use of Pitjantjatjara in theater (Chapter 7). Given the problems stemming from the policies discussed in Part One, such efforts to create wide public awareness and space for these languages are important and deserve careful consideration.

The four chapters that comprise Part Three, ‘Language centres and programs,’ continue the discussion of revitalization strategies in terms of the roles and programs promoted by community language centers, which play a significant role in Australian language revitalization. A shared theme of these chapters is that language centers can accomplish many positive things, but that there is an ongoing tension as to whose priorities and methods are (or should be) promoted. Chapter 11, ‘Whose language centre is it anyway?’, captures this issue especially well. It differs from all other chapters in Re-awakening languages in that its authorship is attributed not to (an) individual(s), but rather to the Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC) as a whole. A footnote explains that a longstanding non-Aboriginal staff member wrote the essay in consultation with others, and that the views it expresses are meant to represent “Aboriginal peoples from a wide range of language and personal backgrounds” (132: footnote 1). Given this diversity, the comments are varied, but they collectively assert the following thesis: Aboriginal community needs, cultural norms, and pedagogical strategies are not adequately integrated into most language revitalization efforts across Australia, and this shortcoming can largely be attributed to ideologies that place practices of the Western academy above those of indigenous communities in designing, assessing, and funding language programs. Anyone involved in indigenous language programs will benefit from reading this essay, not only because the policy implications it discusses are important, but also because it provides ideas for improvement through its examples of how the KLRC has shifted its focus in order to better represent Aboriginal needs and goals. Also noteworthy is that the KLRC introduces a ‘language continuation continuum’ (138) that they represent with a figure where community needs for naturalistic language acquisition lie at one end, which receives limited focus and few resources, and documentation and archiving fall largely at the other end, which receives greater focus and more resources. They argue that more resources need to be directed toward the former.

A related debate on where to focus language efforts is raised in Part Four, ‘Language in education,’ which with ten chapters is the largest section of Re-awakening languages. In their introduction to the section, Susan Poetsch and Kevin Lowe note that “Indigenous communities often express a degree of reservation about language programs in educational institutions” (157), but go on to note how schools can be powerful sites for language learning and socialization. As with Part Three, Part Four illustrates how and why community control and involvement are so important. Most chapters connect policies at the state or territory level to programs in local educational institutions, and illustrate how indigenous language curriculum can be created and promoted within varying educational norms. Unfortunately, readers who are not familiar with Australian educational practices may be at a disadvantage since the chapters tend to assume a preexisting knowledgebase. In particular, the programs discussed in five chapters (16–19 and 22) stem from a 2003 policy change in New South Wales. This was when the state’s Board of Studies published the Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus (Board of Studies, New South Wales 2003), a generic but wide-reaching document that outlines a program to build Aboriginal language knowledge and
skills, created specifically to facilitate revitalization. Chapter 19 includes an overview of the Syllabus and its effects (219–221), which many readers will benefit from reading prior to the rest of Part Four. I also recommend Lowe & Ash (2006) for their discussion of the sociopolitical context in which the Syllabus was created and implemented.

One chapter in Part Four stands out because of its focus on a too-often overlooked point. In Chapter 20, ‘The importance of understanding language ecologies for revitalisation,’ Felicity Meakins discusses the potential pitfalls of assuming a monolingual ideal when structuring language revitalization efforts in places where multilingualism and code-switching are the norm. Indeed, language documentation, conservation, and revitalization efforts are frequently framed around discrete languages, and while an ethnographic account of a given community would normally address language mixing practices, a hypothetical Grammar of [X Language] may not—even if the speakers of the language under discussion normally code-switch in their natural speech. In describing a pattern of unmarked language mixing in the Victoria River District, Meakins also illustrates problems with most contemporary models of immersion. She notes that they emphasize speaking and staying in a given language, and questions what effects this has in situations where the historical and contemporary norm is to mix the target language with other ones. As such, this essay addresses an invisible policy of some language documentation and revitalization programs, which is that they can delegitimize situations such as the one Meakins describes. I see it as essential reading for those involved in language documentation and revitalization, and especially encourage its adoption in field methods courses.

Another invisible policy frequently guides language revitalization programs, this being the belief that linguistic fluency is (or should be) the main goal of these efforts. In the first chapter of Part Five, ‘Literacy and oracy,’ (Chapter 23) John Hobson examines this issue and takes a view different from most chapters in this book, which largely emphasize goals of language prestige and awareness over linguistic proficiency. It should be noted here that I, too, fall into this latter group, and have argued that full linguistic proficiency is not an ideal measure of success for my own Miami community (see Leonard 2011:138–141). Though Hobson rightly notes that fluency does not correspond to a single objective standard and thus will be measured differently depending on context, he nevertheless argues for its general importance and warns that goals that lie elsewhere may ultimately be counterproductive. In this way, Hobson strays from the predominant emphasis throughout Re-awakening languages of not imposing goals, though he clarifies that he is speaking of the importance of measuring and promoting increases in fluency within a language community, and that this allows communities to be at different stages.

The other two chapters of Part Five address the interrelationships of literacy and oracy in language revitalization contexts. Of these, Chapter 24, ‘Sounds, spelling and learning to read an Aboriginal language,’ is the only chapter in Re-awakening languages that reports on a formal, quantitative field study. Authors Caroline Jones, Paul Chandler, and Kevin Lowe investigated the literacy development of 114 English-speaking children in New South Wales who were learning an Aboriginal language at the same time they were learning to read in English. Though their study was limited, its preliminary findings suggest a small positive relationship; that is, students who were learning an Aboriginal language were better able to decode English writing. In any case, the question warrants more research, and I hope the authors continue their investigation. Certainly, those already en-
gaged in language revitalization often need no convincing in this area, but evidence that links study of indigenous languages to better development of general literacy is always useful to share with policymakers and funders.

The three chapters that comprise Part Six, ‘Language and technology,’ examine the potential benefits and downfalls of technology in language revitalization. Though focused on Australian programs, the themes of these chapters echo those of literature that reports on initiatives elsewhere, so I will keep my summary brief. Themes include how to best organize and disseminate the language information (particularly in rural areas), and the importance of situating the language in culturally appropriate contexts, even when the medium of transmission may have no historical precedent. All three chapters detail specific programs and the technology involved, especially with respect to how language data is organized electronically, and will be of particular interest to people working in lexicography.

Finally, Part Seven, ‘Language documentation,’ evokes a discussion currently occurring in linguistics and related fields about the importance of language documentation. However, rather than focusing on creating or archiving that documentation, these six chapters illustrate how it can be used for revitalization. In doing so, they address the increasingly common scenario in which documentation and revitalization happen concurrently, and are informed by diverse language stakeholders through a collaborative process (see Chapter 34 in particular for discussion of this second point). As with Part Six, Part Seven’s examples largely parallel those reported on elsewhere, so I am focusing my comments on two chapters that address a less examined topic: the protocols for combining historical documentation with knowledge currently held within a community.

When reading Part Seven, I was reminded of something that occurred in my own tribal community during the mid 1990s, when the Miami language was still in its initial stages of reclamation. At that time, there was a small group of Miami elders who had very limited but nevertheless important direct knowledge of the Miami language, and my grandfather was one of them. When I was a child, he taught me a Miami greeting *bezon*, his knowledge of which came from interactions with people, not from written records. Important is that this word is not the basic greeting *aya* that one finds in most of the legacy documentation; moreover, [b] and [z] are not part of Miami’s sound inventory. It is thus clear that this word was borrowed, but due to its use within the Miami community, it arguably was (and is) a Miami word. As Miami language learners who started with legacy documentation were using the greeting *aya*, my grandfather and some other elders were initially skeptical of them and of the reclamation effort as a whole. However, that skepticism was mitigated when both greetings were later included in a Miami wordbook. As with my anecdote, Chapters 31 and 32 illustrate the importance of formally valuing community knowledge, even if (perhaps especially if) that knowledgebase is incomplete.

In Chapter 31, ‘A house already lived in,’ Christina Eira and Lynnette Solomon-Dent address “how to balance the possibilities of linguistic analysis and the knowledge latent in archive sources with contemporary knowledge, usage and priorities for the language” (373). The authors encountered a situation common in highly endangered languages: a reduction in lexical and grammatical contrasts. They examine this phenomenon in the context of Gunnai pronouns, for which the documentation shows a system far more intricate than the one in contemporary use. Through their account of their research on, and community dissemination of, the full historical set of pronouns, Eira and Solomon-Dent dem-
onstrate how one can frame information from documentation as an addition to community knowledge, as opposed to a replacement of it. In Chapter 32, ‘Bringing the Language home: the Ngarrindjeri dictionary project,’ Mary-Anne Gale and Syd Sparrow reinforce this principle through their discussion of the collaborative process by which they compiled a Ngarrindjeri dictionary. As with the example of Gunnai pronouns, the creation of this dictionary started with contemporary knowledge as its foundation, and then added vocabulary that emerged from historical documentation. Importantly, this dictionary has been well received by the Ngarrindjeri community. This made me wonder if the skepticism initially held by elders in my community, in the anecdote related above, could have been avoided if their linguistic knowledge had been more valorized from the outset. The answer of course has implications for best practices in documentation.

Having now commented on its seven parts, I will close this review by revisiting Re-awakening languages as a whole. Several things come to mind. First is that while reading it, I felt connected to Australia, despite having never been there. I believe this was facilitated by the many personal accounts in this volume, along with its frequent references to connection with land—referred to as ‘Country’ in an Australian Aboriginal context and in several chapters. Second is that I thought a lot about the book’s title. The editors’ introduction and many individual chapters discuss the pros and cons of terminology such as ‘revitalisation’ and ‘revival’, and while no single term is perfect, I appreciated their decision to use the metaphor of re-awakening. Throughout the book, even in the parts that discuss significant problems or limitations, there is a sense of optimism and of a future in which Aboriginal languages will have a stronger presence. ‘Re-awakening’ captures this well. Finally, I wish to address a point that’s frequently included in book reviews, this being commentary on what the book lacks. Indeed, Re-awakening languages doesn’t cover several possible topics and its chapters don’t address every region of Australia, but I do not see this as a shortcoming. Rather, that the editors were able to solicit so many contributions from such a diverse group is impressive, and we can hope that they will be able to continue this in future publications. This is a fine book and I extend my appreciation to those who made it happen.

References


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