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Understanding how language revitalisation works: a realist synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous communities, linguists, teachers, and language activists have been developing methods to revitalise endangered languages over several decades. Not only are these methods diverse, they are usually implemented in various ways according to local needs and aspirations. Language revitalisation methods focus on proficiency, but there is also interest in strengthening identity, resilience, and wellbeing. Aside from a handful of successes, programs may not be achieving desired outcomes. One could try to evaluate specific programs. However, we believe that a necessary first step is to examine published literature of revitalisation efforts to develop initial understandings of how they work. In particular, we seek to understand how revitalisation efforts tap into the speech community, how local participation affects outcomes, and how this involvement is supported and sustained by external programs, with a focus on language revitalisation efforts in Australia. We conduct a realist synthesis, and through analysis of 125 pieces of literature, we identify 13 initial theories. In analysing these theories, we identify two major gaps in our understanding of language revitalisation: how revitalisation programs work to strengthen communities and promote commitment. We propose these as significant, under-theorised elements of successful revitalisation which can guide exploration at the level of individual programs.

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Introduction

Indigenous communities are increasingly engaging in efforts to strengthen their traditional languages through language revitalisation strategies (Grenoble and Whaley 2021). In Australia, these efforts began to flourish in the 1970s following decades of government policies and practices that disrupted intergenerational language transmission (Gooda 2009; Walsh 2014). Discussions around endangered languages have brought awareness of language loss but have not contributed much to developing revitalisation methods (Grenoble and Whaley 2021) and little is known about which strategies produce the best results (cf. Obiero 2010). Hebrew is still the most well-known successful example of language revitalisation (Szul 2015). However, we know little about the success of language revitalisation efforts of smaller Indigenous speech communities, such as those in Australia.

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Language revitalisation literature tends to present what has been done and where it has been done but lacks causal accounts for how and why specific outcomes are produced (cf. Obiero 2010). Even the most well-resourced, long-running language programs are not necessarily achieving the desired results (Roche 2020). Evaluations that focus on measuring language vitality reveal that programs may not necessarily create new speakers (McIvor and Anisman 2018; O’Grady 2018). As a result, we have insufficient explanations for what outcomes programs produce, and why their results vary (Bell 2013). Communities lack a principled basis for choosing from the wide range of methods to use, given local contextual factors. In short, we need to develop theory on what makes language revitalisation efforts work (cf. Obiero 2010).

In this paper, we analyse language revitalisation literature and build initial theory to shed light on the role of speech communities in language revitalisation and how their role influences outcomes of language programs. We view language revitalisation as community-level action, not just a language-specific focus (cf. Leonard 2017). As this synthesis is part of a larger research project based in Australia, our synthesis prioritises research that discusses Australian Indigenous language programs and efforts. We do not claim these initial theories apply to all Indigenous communities engaged in language revitalisation, but we expect that communities can adapt our methods and findings to their own situations.

Language revitalisation

Language revitalisation covers a diverse range of informal efforts and formal programs from ‘top-down’ to ‘bottom-up’ approaches, with various goals. In this section we map out the space in preparation for a realist synthesis of what has been reported in the literature.

Language shift and revitalisation

All traditional Indigenous languages in Australia are at risk of language shift (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014), a situation where people ‘abandon their original vernacular language in favour of another’ (Kandler and Steele 2017, 1) until only the eldest generations speak it (Lewis and Simons 2016). Language shift is often linked to interrupted intergenerational language transmission (Fishman 2001), usually a consequence of discrimination, oppression, colonisation, and cultural genocide (Hill 2002; Hinton, Huss, and Roche 2018b; Zuckermann 2020).

Language revitalisation is the process of reversing language shift by implementing methods to strengthen the language (Fitzgerald 2021; Hinton 2001). Various terms are used, such as language maintenance, reversing language shift, language reclamation, language revival, etc. We favour language revitalisation, following Hinton, Huss, and Roche (2018b) who observe that this is the most common term for all efforts to maintain or reverse declining language use. Similarly, we follow Lewis and Simons (2016) in discussing ‘speech communities’, rather than ‘language communities’, since it is the former who are connected by a sense of shared identity, shared linguistic repertoire, and shared norms of language use.

Communities, language activists, teachers, and linguists employ a variety of revitalisation methods including community language classes, language camps, language nests, language use in formal and informal education, master-apprentice programs, and so on (Hinton 2001; Lewis and Simons 2016). Some argue that this plethora of options results from there being no clear optimal strategy, from limited understanding of how language revitalisation works, and from a lack of consensus on how to evaluate programs (cf. Henderson, Rohloff, and Henderson 2014; Zuckermann and Walsh 2011). Others have observed that success depends on community aspirations (Mufwene 2017), on new uptake of a language (Hinton 2010), and on adopting realistic goals (Lewis and Simons 2016).

Measuring success

The assumed aim of language revitalisation programs is to increase proficiency and create new speakers (Fishman 2001; Hinton 2001; Szul 2015). Accounts of language revitalisation discuss acquisition, motivation, difficulties in language learning, and attitudes towards language learning (Bradley 2002, 2019; Lewis and Simons 2016; Olawsky 2013). Similarly, Target 16 of Australia’s Closing the Gap strategy states the ultimate goal of Indigenous language efforts is to restart inter-generational language transmission.

However, communities may define success as encompassing more than just fluency. Language is a vital part of belonging to a community and drives cultural transmission (McIvor 2013). Language programs have been shown to increase pride in the community, even if they do not increase language proficiency (O’Grady 2018). Leonard argues that focusing on linguistic rather than cultural outcomes is colonising, and that success might be tied to the ‘integration of community needs and worldviews’ into language revitalisation efforts (Leonard 2017, 15).

In the *National Indigenous Languages Survey 2014*, Indigenous respondents stated that they prioritised goals such as helping people connect with their language and culture, increasing awareness of the language among the community, promoting the language to the general public, and improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014, 19–21). Similarly, Grenoble and Whaley (2021, 912) assert that language revitalisation is ‘more about the empowerment of language users, or potential language users, than the language per se’ and that it can be a mechanism to improve community health. The reality is that communities may be just as interested in extra-linguistic outcomes as language-specific goals.

While accepting the importance of language acquisition in language revitalisation, we go further to explore the additional parts of the process that not only contribute to acquisition, but also strengthen culture and wellbeing.

Indigenous Australian communities tend to be collectivist (Miller 2015). Therefore, this research examines the literature through the lens of the speech community making shared decisions, especially in the context of communities where the elders have final say on cultural and linguistic matters. However, we also recognise that there may be individuals within speech communities who have alternate aspirations (Fishman 2001).

Mapping the territory

Realist synthesis requires an initial model to guide the analysis (Luetsch, Rowett, and Twigg 2021; Pawson 2006; Wong et al. 2013). In order to create an initial model, we browsed peer-reviewed and grey literature on language revitalisation as well as reflected on our own experiences. We consulted around 30 experts and stakeholders (roughly two-thirds were Indigenous and two-thirds women)

Table 1. Elements of Indigenous language revitalisation programs.

Language community commitment <i>Motivation and commitment from the speech community</i>	Skills and training <i>The skills and training needed to run a language program provided by people such as linguists and teachers</i>	Funding <i>Money for programs, participants, workers, resources, training, and physical spaces provided either through government grants or other sources</i>	Space and support <i>Physical space for language activities as well as organisational support</i>
Wider community recognition <i>Acknowledgement from people outside of the speech community of the importance of revitalising the language</i>	Resources <i>Resources need for language activities such as documentation, learning materials, elders, and language speakers</i>	Goals and planning <i>Goals matching the aspirations of the community and what is achievable given local circumstances</i>	Getting language into the wider community <i>Moving the language from learning environments into everyday use around the community</i>

working in language revitalisation centres and programs around Australia. From this, we synthesised an initial model of eight elements that language revitalisation activities supposedly require (Table 1).

Table 1 is merely a list of concerns. There is nothing in it to show how these elements contribute to the success of Indigenous language revitalisation programs, which elements are essential versus optional, or which should be prioritised when resources are scarce. There is a need to investigate programs on a deeper level to better understand how they function, drawing on what we can learn from the literature. The aim is not to produce more lists, but to gain a better understanding of how contextual factors enable underlying causes to produce outcomes. In essence, we want to understand *how language programs work, for whom, in what circumstances and why*.

While one could start by investigating a few programs in depth, we believe that it is more helpful to first explore published accounts of revitalisation efforts and develop initial theories of how such efforts work which can be refined through further research on the ground with Indigenous communities. To accomplish this, we conducted a realist synthesis of the literature. We examine language revitalisation from the perspective of the indigenous speech community and their role in this process and, in view of a decolonising agenda, we consider a more fundamental question: **What is the speech community's role in language revitalisation?** More specifically we ask: **how does their involvement influence outcomes and how can programs encourage and sustain involvement from the speech community?**

Methods

The realist approach to data analysis seeks to understand how programs work in particular settings (Pawson and Tilley 1997) and to provide explanatory accounts of why programs produce outcomes (Luetsch, Rowett, and Twigg 2021) through unpacking the inner workings of programs by identifying how contextual factors or 'context' of programs trigger the underlying causes or 'mechanisms' to produce 'outcomes' (Dalkin et al. 2015). Realist synthesis is an iterative approach that starts by constructing initial theories, analysing the literature to refine those theories, returning to the literature as needed, to produce a deeper understanding of how and why programs achieve their outcomes.

According to realist thinking, 'mechanisms' are hidden causal processes which produce outcomes and explain what it is about a program that 'makes things happen' (Pawson 2006, 23) under the right circumstances (Dalkin et al. 2015). For example, we might notice an increase in Indigenous student attendance during Indigenous language school programs. One could assume that the program itself is the cause of the increased attendance. However, on closer examination, we may find that it is the family connections between language teachers and students which motivates the students to attend more regularly, because seeing their relatives teaching makes students feel proud. Here, the mechanism would be an increase in pride. In realist synthesis, the researcher proposes mechanisms from the literature to explain how programs achieve outcomes, however, there will always be a gap between the mechanisms proposed by researchers and the real mechanisms that cause change (Williams 2018).

'Context' is the circumstances or factors that affect whether a program's mechanism 'triggers' (Pawson and Tilley 1997, Pawson 2006). Context can be anything that enables or impedes program effectiveness (Greenhalgh and Manzano 2021). For example, the presence of family members in language learning sessions might motivate students to participate more in the session because they feel more comfortable with that familial support. Here, the context is the presence of family members, which triggers a feeling of comfort in the students, encouraging them to participate more.

The central units of analysis in realist inquiry are program theories (Dalkin et al. 2015). These program theories, or hypotheses, are causal explanations about how, for whom, in what circumstances and to what extent a policy, program, strategy, or initiative is intended to work (Pawson

and Tilley 1997). These theories are synthesised by looking at how certain contexts trigger mechanisms to produce outcomes. Policy makers or practitioners can use these causal explanations to modify existing or future programs to produce desired outcomes (Wong et al. 2013). While realist literature references program theory, the theories we propose here do not necessarily apply to a specific program, e.g. the Master Apprentice Program, but instead a broader understanding of language revitalisation efforts.

Initial theory building

We build initial theory for this review following the iterative steps to realist synthesis (Pawson et al. 2005; Wong et al. 2013). After constructing an initial model (Table 1), the first author conducted searches, selected articles, extracted and organised data, and synthesised findings, from which we propose initial theories. Searching for primary studies is an iterative process guided by the research questions, includes a wide range of literature, and is likely to be revisited as the researchers find new information pertaining to the programs being investigated (Wong et al. 2013).

Using the eight elements identified in Table 1 as a guide, the first author conducted a broad search to identify relevant literature, followed by smaller, targeted searches to build program theory. This involved accessing databases such as *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts* (ProQuest) in tandem with forward and backward citation searching (cf. Luetsch, Rowett, and Twigg 2021; Wong et al. 2013). Database search strings included ‘language revitalisation’, ‘Indigenous language programs’, and terms from the eight elements of the initial model. The first author employed forward and backward citation searching especially in the identification of studies with data on Australian programs and efforts. All papers were imported into Zotero for screening (Corporation for Digital Scholarship 2017).

A realist synthesis ‘requires a series of judgments about the relevance and robustness of particular data for the purposes of answering a specific question’ (Wong et al. 2013, 10). In following other realist syntheses, the first author screened titles, abstracts, and the full paper, if necessary, of the identified literature and included only those articles which could help answer our research questions and develop program theory. Literature that discussed Australian language programs was generally included as contextual information is likely to offer relevant insights for this paper and future research.

Data analysis

The first author conducted the coding process by importing selected literature into NVivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2018), reading all included articles, and coding segments that helped answer the research questions using the initial model of Table 1 as a framework. The first round of coding identified information relevant to the 8 elements and coded it into 8 corresponding codes in NVivo. For example, he coded passages that discussed programs being driven by the community into the ‘language community commitment’ code. The first author analysed the coding and separated the broad initial 8 codes into 23 narrower codes across the domains. For example, language community commitment was broken down into commitment, community driven, awareness, and support and involvement. During the coding and analysis stage, the authors met regularly to discuss the initial thoughts and categorisation of emerging codes. The first author augmented the analysis with further literature searches as needed (cf. Luetsch, Rowett, and Twigg 2021; Wong et al. 2013).

Findings

After completing the screening process, the first author identified 125 pieces of literature from academic and grey literature (readers can find the full database of literature included in the synthesis at https://bit.ly/wiltshire_et_al2022lit-database or by contacting the primary author), primarily from

Table 2. 13 Initial program theories.

Initial program theories	
IPT1: language awareness	IPT7: attitudes towards language varieties
IPT2: connecting to culture	IPT8: language in use
IPT3: sense of belonging	IPT9: feeling safe
IPT4: sharing stories	IPT10: community control of language planning
IPT5: elders are key	IPT11: access to language
IPT6: language ecology	IPT12: small steps
	IPT13: sufficient time

Australia, the United States, New Zealand, and Canada. As English is the main language in these four countries, most research on the topic is likely to be in English (cf. Taylor et al. 2019). Considering the importance of contextual information in realist synthesis, having predominantly English sources from four countries that are similar in their relationships to Indigenous peoples and colonisation is relevant to a study based in Australia.

The literature that the searching process identified as relevant to our research questions spans 1989–2021, of which 103 articles were from 2010 or later. The first author conducted initial searches in 2020 and iterative searches through 2021 as required. Given the relative lack of explanatory accounts about how language revitalisation programs achieve their outcomes, we propose initial theories (hypotheses) synthesised from available literature, which can then be refined through further research with local speech communities in Australia. From the 125 papers, we synthesised the literature and now propose 13 initial theories to address our research questions (see Table 2). In the next section we discuss relevant points from the literature and present theories we developed.

Initial program theories

IPT1: language awareness

To revitalise a language, the speech community needs to get involved, either through formal programs or informal efforts. Community awareness of language shift can motivate participation and promote local agency (Budrikis 2021; Disbray et al. 2018). However, the community may not be aware of language shift because when people hear the language spoken, even in limited circumstances, the community may feel a false sense of security (Bell 2013).

If awareness of language shift is key to getting people involved in language activities, then language programs can increase participation by spreading awareness, a convenient feedback loop. For example, Indigenous Australians have said that spreading awareness is one of the reasons they engage in language activities (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014). Even a single person or small group from the community can drive efforts and encourage others (Grenoble and Whaley 2006); ‘strong, charismatic leaders’ are a feature of many successful language programs (Fettes 1997, 313; cf. Amery and Buckskin 2012). Therefore, an early activity could be for an individual or group of people in the speech community to spread awareness of language shift.

Initial Program Theory 1: Language revitalisation activities can help the community recognise language shift. Highly motivated individuals or small groups can drive initial efforts that can raise community awareness. Once the community is aware, they may be motivated to participate in language activities.

IPT2: connecting to community

Adult Indigenous language learners often have limited opportunities to hear the language (Disbray et al. 2018). Sometimes, disconnection from community or culture may prevent people from using their traditional language (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014). Motivation to participate in language activities might also come from a desire to (re)connect with culture (Laginha and Mahboob 2018). The Master-Apprentice model leverages this idea by trying to establish strong relationships between elders and adult learners (Fettes 1997). For example, the Alutiiq Language Club (ALC) program in

Alaska, based on the Master-Apprentice model, creates opportunities for participants to connect and learn from elders, opportunities which are rare outside the club (Bach 2014).

Moreover, learning language and culture from elders helped ALC participants strengthen relationships. One participant stated that ALC is ‘exciting, contagious’ and it ‘creates greater group cohesion, and fosters a family-like environment for learning’ while another participant stated that ALC strengthens community relationships (Bach 2014, 89). Community members create bonds through participating in ALC and interacting with elders, fostering previously absent generational connections: ‘the act of gathering, in and of itself, creates space and time to nurture the [ALC] community’ (Bach 2014, 90). Getting more community members involved in language revitalisation efforts can help rebuild communities through ‘individual and collective remembering’ (Bell 2013, 402).

Initial Program Theory 2: In situations where community members feel disconnected from other people, language activities that establish a communal environment to help people learn about language and culture, as well as get to know each other, can strengthen community relationships. These strengthened relationships can increase the amount of language exposure learners receive because they have more opportunities to interact with speakers.

IPT3: sense of belonging

Family-like environments encourage participants to share culture, tradition, and language which helps strengthen identity and facilitate healing from trauma associated with colonisation (Bach 2014). In these family-like environments there is a sense of belonging and of being cared for:

So I think that my attachment to the language movement is striving for that sense of family and that connection. And so, I do it because of that feeling that I get by feeling that I belong somewhere and that people care about me (participant 8). (Bach 2014, 90)

Elders and other community members experience empowerment and healing through learning about each other, which is facilitated by family-like environments (Bach 2014). Furthermore, language activities create a sense of belonging through sharing language and culture (Jenni et al. 2017).

Initial Program Theory 3: If language activities provide family-like atmospheres that promote a sense of belonging, where culture, tradition, and language are shared, then participants may experience healing and pride because their identities are affirmed and strengthened.

IPT4: sharing stories

Sharing stories can contribute to strengthening community relationships and improving wellbeing. People can process and heal from traumas while strengthening community connections through sharing stories (McCaffery 2005), therefore, storytelling can be crucial to language revitalisation (Fettes 1997). For sharing to achieve these outcomes, the process should be part of multigenerational learning opportunities with elders, and include cultural teachings, histories, worldviews, and perspectives of participants (Desmoulins, Oskineegish, and Jaggard 2019). Bach (2014) suggests that elders contribute to community pride and healing by transmitting their knowledge of language and culture. More generally, community members and participants in language activities enjoy learning from elders (Bach 2014; Fettes 1997).

Initial Program Theory 4: Multi-generational learning opportunities that encourage elders to share stories and knowledge strengthen community connections and improve wellbeing because participants enjoy learning from elders.

IPT5: elders are key

While the existence of a next generation of speakers is key to intergenerational language transmission, the involvement of elders in the revitalisation process is beneficial. Elders build

relationships (Bach 2014) and improve community wellbeing (Jenni et al. 2017) through sharing stories. By learning from elders, participants can connect to culture (Salmon et al. 2018) and strengthen community relationships (Bach 2014). The Alutiiq Language Club provides opportunities for people to interact with elders, which is what motivates some people to participate (Bach 2014). Furthermore, elders can feel renewed pride through sharing their linguistic history with the community (Bell 2013).

Initial Program Theory 5: Language activities that have opportunities for elders to share knowledge, experiences, and stories can strengthen community relationships, wellbeing, and connection to culture because of the satisfaction that community members receive from interacting with elders.

IPT6: language ecology

Language activities are more effective when based on an understanding of the local language ecology, which includes the repertoire of language varieties and their domains of use (Lewis and Simons 2016; Meakins 2010). Language activities need to consider how each generation is using language (Bell 2013). People with varying levels of proficiency can still communicate, using even limited language skills and mixing languages (Higgins 2019). In fact, immersion-based language activities may impede existing language practices if they interfere with grassroots language revitalisation practices and ultimately hinder language revitalisation efforts (Meakins 2010). This means that programs might need to legitimise local linguistic practices, such as language mixing, and take care not to impose outside views that may valorise fluency, ancestral ways of speaking, and language immersion (Higgins 2019; Meakins 2010; Thieberger 2002).

Initial Program Theory 6: If language revitalisation efforts do not consider the local language ecology, they may discourage community participation because they do not align with community goals.

IPT7: attitudes towards language varieties

Revitalisation efforts may not reproduce the ancestral variety and purist attitudes can lead to unrealistic expectations for learners which might discourage language learning (Dorian 1994; Fettes 1997; Zuckermann and Walsh 2011). Hinton states that

a belief [in] a goal where everyone in the community will speak Karok to each other again is unrealistic. Language revitalisation in areas of language diversity and small populations is going to be very different than for languages like Hebrew, Hawaiian and Maori. (Hinton 2015, 39:00m)

Communities may disagree about the authenticity of language (Hornsby 2019), making some learners feel inadequate compared to native speakers (Higgins 2019) and discouraging younger community members from speaking and learning (Bradley 2002). In one example, some community members spoke less because they were afraid of making mistakes and felt ashamed of their perceived lack of proficiency (Higgins 2019). For some multilingual Indigenous people who make use of all linguistic resources available to them, debates about authentic language may not be important (Higgins 2019). As Bell (2013, 408) observes:

Some of us share a strong desire to see our traditional languages survive in some way, even if it's just in a modified, reduced form, along with surviving adapted cultural practices, which we regard as critical to our identity and distinctiveness as Aboriginal people.

Partial speakers, non-speakers, and learners may be the best candidates for revitalisation programs due to their prior exposure to language and connection to the community, and alienating them can harm revitalisation efforts (Davis 2016).

Initial Program Theory 7: If all language varieties used by the community are recognised as legitimate and the community can use whatever variety they are comfortable with, then more people are more likely to participate in language learning activities, because they may be less afraid of judgement from others.

IPT8: language in use

Active use strengthens languages (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014), re-establishing them as living, working languages in families and communities (McIvor and Anisman 2018). Community members need to learn the language, but they also need opportunities to use it (Hinton 2001; Poetsch 2013). This means that a language with no uses will have no users and will not be transmitted to the next generations (AIATSIS & FATSIL 2005; Lewis and Simons 2016).

Functions can be identified through the community selecting life-crucial bodies of knowledge they want to preserve, then focussing on developing language to sustain that knowledge (Lewis and Simons 2016). Lewis and Simons argue that associating language with highly valued functions, such as ceremonial functions, will help sustain language use, because it shows the usefulness and the value of the language as a community tool and marker of identity.

Initial Program Theory 8: If community members identify functions for the target language through selecting life-crucial bodies of knowledge they would like to preserve, more people may be motivated to speak and learn the language because the community assigns more value to the language.

IPT9: feeling safe

Spaces where people learn and use their language need to be designed in such a way as to ensure community members feel safe. People may feel distressed when they are unable to speak their ancestral language (Simpson, Disbray, and O'Shannessy 2019). This distress, and related emotions of shame, shyness, and lack of confidence (Higgins 2019; Jenni et al. 2017; McIvor 2020) may discourage people from learning and using the language (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014). The importance of this point is underscored by studies in second language learning more generally, where the emotional state of learners and their environment can negatively impact learning outcomes (Gardner and Ciotti 2018; Krashen 1982). This point extends to interactions, such as when a negative comment or a correction is discouraging or traumatic (Hinton 2011; Johnson 2013).

Language activities need to provide a space for participants to learn without worrying about mistakes, which can improve confidence and reduce shame (Chrisp 2005). These spaces should focus on communication rather than grammatical correctness, allowing participants to experience success and build confidence (Amery 2018; Chrisp 2005; Gardner and Ciotti 2018). To help participants feel more comfortable, they might begin with isolated words and important names (cf. Amery 2009), which can strengthen their identities (Fettes 1997; Walsh 2018).

Initial Program Theory 9: If learners have lower self-confidence or feel ashamed of their language abilities, activities may need to provide a safe space where participants can learn and use the language without criticism or fear of failure. This safe space can help communities overcome lack of confidence and shame because participants feel safe and experience less anxiety.

IPT10: community control of language planning

The self-determination of a speech community, including the setting of goals and the design and delivery of programs, is essential for the success and sustainability of language activities. Communities need to approve and have ownership of language activities (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014), and to be involved in planning those activities (Bach 2014), which can ensure they are realistic (Obiero 2010), encouraging long term commitment (Lowe and Giacon 2019). Communities should decide on their goals first and then employ language activities to target those goals (Lewis and Simons 2016). This self-determination can help strengthen identity, language, and culture (Laginha and Mahboob 2018). Additionally, each community has different needs and strengths (Ash et al. 2010) and the community are best positioned to identify their needs and utilise their strengths. Indigenous Australians participate in language revitalisation first and foremost to strengthen their connection to language and culture (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014) and these extra-linguistic benefits can be just as valuable as increasing language proficiency (Johnson 2014).

Initial Program Theory 10: If language planning happens at the local level with the community in control, targeted goals may be more realistic, and the community may be more motivated to engage and sustain revitalisation efforts because the community has ownership of the process.

IPT11: access to language

Community autonomy includes determining who can access, use, teach, and speak the language. Consequences of colonisation, such as loss of land and separation from family, leave the possibility that the language is one remaining emblem of sovereignty not yet stolen from a community (Olawsky 2010). There may be a concern that if outsiders learn to speak the language before the community does, there may be a sense that the language is being stolen (Gale 2011). Community control may also prevent outsiders from using the language incorrectly, as well as ensuring that cultural protocols are respected (Newry and Palmer 2003) while enabling the community to choose not only what knowledge is transmitted, but to whom it is transmitted (Lewis and Simons 2016).

Initial Program Theory 11: If the speech community can decide who can learn and use the language, this may help restore or strengthen a sense of authority over language and culture because the community feels in control of language efforts.

IPT12: small steps

Language revitalisation is a gradual, ongoing process which might start off slowly, progressing to more ambitious goals as needed (Hinton, Huss, and Roche 2018a). Community members who do not understand the process of second language acquisition may misjudge the time it takes to learn language, creating unrealistic expectations (Chrisp 2005; Lewis and Simons 2016), which can hinder language revitalisation efforts and discourage ongoing participation (Grenoble and Whaley 2006). Therefore, efforts should aim to progress in stages with participants experiencing success at each stage (Jolly 1995). Celebrating these small successes can encourage participation, help bridge communities to the next challenge, and promote long-term success (Bell 2013; Fishman 2001; Hinton, Huss, and Roche 2018a).

Initial Program Theory 12: If program goals are broken down into smaller, more visibly achievable segments where participants can experience success at each stage, they may be more motivated to participate and work towards larger goals because they feel a sense of achievement and pride in their abilities.

IPT13: sufficient time

The availability of community members to participate may be outside the control of a language program (Bell 2013; Bowern 2017; McIvor 2015). As an example, the Miriwoong Master-Apprentice Program initially suffered because participants found it difficult to fit the program into their daily routines (Olawsky 2013). A counterargument is sometimes made that people will make time if something is important, however, this argument comes from a position of 'privilege of good job security and salary' (Bowern 2017, e246). Furthermore, social issues such as substance abuse and poor community health might result in language revitalisation efforts being low priority for some, impacting the level of involvement from the community (Meakins 2010). The scale of language revitalisation efforts needs to be adjusted depending on the time available. For example, the Yawuru community teachers realised they were spending most of their time preparing and delivering language programs to school children, leaving them limited time to improve their own language skills. They decided to focus instead on strengthening the language skills of a small group of key community members who could then use their language skills to teach their language to the wider community (Disbray et al. 2018).

Initial Program Theory 13: If community members have competing responsibilities or other social issues that limit their availability, language activities may suffer from lack of participation due to community members' not having enough spare time to participate.

Discussion

We have presented 13 initial theories that address the speech community’s role in language revitalisation, looking at how their involvement influences outcomes and how programs can encourage and sustain involvement. In this section, we explore connections between the theories and discuss further nuances. We elaborate on how our proposed theories relate to commitment, strength, and wellbeing. Finally, we discuss some limitations of this study.

Promoting commitment

Language revitalisation success may depend on encouraging and sustaining community involvement. Here we look at program theories that shed light on how to promote speech community commitment (see [Table 3](#)).

It is not only important for the community to be aware of language shift (IPT1), but for the community to have control over designing revitalisation efforts (IPT10), and who is involved (IPT11). Commitment and motivation may be connected to the amount of autonomy a speech community has over language work. Ensuring local control of language revitalisation can promote long term commitment and sustainable efforts, in addition to delivering a range of outcomes such as motivation to participate, setting realistic goals, and having a stronger sense of authority over their own language and culture (IPT10). This connects language revitalisation to decolonisation through communities reclaiming sovereignty and self-determination (Eira 2007).

Recognising the validity of all language varieties that the community speaks (IPT6, IPT7) can promote participation from more of the community and increase the effectiveness of efforts. Communities can build on what they know, increasing confidence while learning at the same time, which aligns with decolonising practices (Stebbins, Eira, and Couzens 2017).

Increasing fluency and numbers of speakers may take time. Smaller steps (IPT12), such as teaching younger generations the traditional names of places, might be something that communities can target, achieve, and celebrate in the short-term, while progressing towards long-term goals. Such

Table 3. Initial program theories (hypotheses) relating to promoting commitment.

IPT1: language awareness	Language revitalisation activities can help the community recognise language shift. Highly motivated individuals or small groups can drive initial efforts that can raise community awareness. Once the community is aware, they may be motivated to participate in language activities.
IPT6: language ecology	If language revitalisation efforts do not consider the local language ecology, they may discourage community participation because they do not align with community goals.
IPT7: attitudes towards language varieties	If all language varieties used by the community are recognised as legitimate and the community can use whatever variety they are comfortable with, then more people are more likely to participate in language learning activities, because they may be less afraid of judgement from others.
IPT8: language in use	If community members identify functions for the target language through selecting life-crucial bodies of knowledge they would like to preserve, more people may be motivated to speak and learn the language because the community assigns more value to the language.
IPT10: community control of language planning	If language planning happens at the local level with the community in control, targeted goals may be more realistic, and the community may be more motivated to engage and sustain revitalisation efforts because the community has ownership of the process.
IPT11: access to language	If the speech community can decide who can learn and use the language, this may help restore or strengthen a sense of authority over language and culture because the community feels in control of language efforts.
IPT12: small steps	If program goals are broken down into smaller, more visibly achievable segments where participants can experience success at each stage, they may be more motivated to participate and work towards larger goals because they feel a sense of achievement and pride in their abilities.
IPT13: sufficient time	If community members have competing responsibilities or other social issues that limit their availability, language activities may suffer from lack of participation due to community members’ not having enough spare time to participate.

proximal goals could focus on highly valued language functions (IPT8). Motivation and commitment to keeping languages strong is one part of the equation which may require prioritising and balancing many facets of life; therefore, it is important to design language activities that consider the social realities of the speech community (IPT13).

Strengthening communities

When we look across the remaining initial theories, we see a consistent theme of ‘strengthening communities’ (see Table 4). This aligns with independent calls to rebuild relationships and communities as part of language revitalisation efforts (Fettes 1997).

When language programs create a family-like atmosphere for language activities, this strengthens identity and wellbeing through a feeling of belonging, which has been linked to positive health outcomes (Caxaj and Gill 2017). Establishing communal environments that promote community interaction can strengthen relationships and identity (IPT2, IPT3). The more the community interacts, the more exposure to language they receive. This can include sharing stories (IPT4), which helps people connect and heal from past traumas. The pleasure of interacting with elders can encourage participation (IPT5). Prioritising effective communication over grammatical correctness can help community members feel safe during language activities (IPT9) which can increase self-esteem and self-confidence. While there are examples in the literature and even in our initial theories about the importance of motivated individuals, here we see a community element: community strength comes from inclusiveness, more than from policing authenticity and purity.

Language revitalisation from the community’s perspective

Of the two themes discussed, promoting commitment has been explored more in the literature, not only in language maintenance and revitalisation (e.g. language attitude and vitality surveys) but also more broadly through studies on motivation. However, we believe that the theme of strengthening communities and its role in language revitalisation is under-theorised.

The work of strengthening communities can be connected to community health and wellbeing. Wellbeing is generally theorised as a long-term benefit resulting from language work. Learning language can make people feel good (Gale 2011), strengthen identity and confidence (Jenni et al. 2017) and help children find their identity, self-confidence, and pride (Laginha and Mahboob 2018). Language revitalisation efforts should be structured as one part of community wellbeing

Table 4. Initial program theories (hypotheses) relating to strengthening communities.

IPT2: connecting to culture	In situations where community members feel disconnected from other people, language activities that establish a communal environment to help people learn about language and culture, as well as get to know each other, can strengthen community relationships. These strengthened relationships can increase the amount of language exposure learners receive because they have more opportunities to interact with speakers.
IPT3: sense of belonging	If language activities provide family-like atmospheres that promote a sense of belonging, where culture, tradition, and language are shared, then participants may experience healing and pride because their identities are affirmed and strengthened.
IPT4: sharing stories	Multi-generational learning opportunities that encourage elders to share stories and knowledge strengthen community connections and improve wellbeing because participants enjoy learning from elders.
IPT5: elders are key	Language activities that have opportunities for elders to share knowledge, experiences, and stories can strengthen community relationships, wellbeing, and connection to culture because of the satisfaction that community members receive from interacting with elders.
IPT9: feeling safe	If learners have lower self-confidence or feel ashamed of their language abilities, activities may need to provide a safe space where participants can learn and use the language without criticism or fear of failure. This safe space can help communities overcome lack of confidence and shame because participants feel safe and experience less anxiety.

(Grenoble and Whaley 2021). However, to the best of our knowledge, language programs rarely target wellbeing alongside language proficiency in the short term.

Fettes (1997, 303–304, emphasis added) states ‘a theory of language renewal must begin with the speakers, with *people “doing language” together in meaningful ways and work out from there*’. We build on this position to propose that language revitalisation is not only a process of sustaining language and culture, but of communities growing stronger. When communities are stronger, they have better capacity to ensure that programs respond to their needs (Chakraborty et al. 2021).

Some limitations

We have limited our focus to elements that helped us explore the role of the local speech community. Of the eight elements identified in Table 1, we did not address program funding, wider community commitment, and getting the language into the wider community. Some aspects of the other five elements are also not under local control, such as training for specialised skills that is only available outside the community. For many programs, resources are limited and focusing on macro-level concerns, such as policy, can be less helpful for small, more disadvantaged languages (Fishman 1991, 2001), such as those in Australia. Therefore, we focused on the role of the local speech community, rather than more ‘external’ components.

The initial theories were developed from the language revitalisation literature, and so any limitations in that literature carry over. This would include the lack of evaluative evidence, and the lack of clarity regarding to what degree Indigenous voices and experiences are reflected in the literature. As stated earlier, we do not claim our findings apply to all language revitalisation contexts, however, we expect that many of these initial theories are worth considering wherever people are exploring how Indigenous language programs work, particularly in smaller speech communities. Further work is needed to understand how language revitalisation works from the perspective of the speech community themselves. There will be important aspects of theory that we have not uncovered, and further research is needed on the ground, leading to refined theory and a better understanding of the processes.

Conclusion

For several decades, communities, linguists, and language activists have designed programs to maintain and revitalise indigenous languages. However, not much is known about what causes these programs to be successful.

In this paper, we have identified initial theories that might lead to more successful revitalisation efforts by investigating how the involvement of local communities influences language revitalisation outcomes. We note that others have argued that existing language revitalisation methods have not necessarily delivered desired results (Olawsky 2013; Roche 2020) and that there is a need for a new conceptualisation of language revitalisation (Grenoble and Whaley 2021). Based on our realist synthesis of the literature, we have proposed that language revitalisation efforts need to include a focus on strengthening communities and promoting commitment. In other words, two necessary contexts for successful revitalisation are a *strong* community and a *committed* community.

Two implications flow from this work. First, if strengthening communities and promoting commitment are building blocks to more successful language revitalisation efforts, achieving them is as important as increasing language proficiency. In cases where language programs are not delivering desired results, addressing these factors may improve efforts.

Second, in addition to increasing language proficiency, the commissioning and evaluation of language programs might expand its scope to explicitly include strengthening communities and promoting commitment. Language activities might target an extended range of positive outcomes such as creating opportunities for the community to spend time together. Language programs could recognise and celebrate new milestones in building community strength. This, in turn, offers a formula for sustainability.

In view of this, it is clear that language revitalisation is not a mere reversal of language loss, but instead a new path forward that fosters more resilient Indigenous communities (cf. Budrikis 2021; Leonard 2017). Our work in examining the literature and drawing out these initial theories lays a foundation for new, community-based research to understand the dynamics of language revitalisation. Such research will continue unpacking the mechanisms of language revitalisation efforts, shedding light on how mechanisms produce outcomes, and ensuring that program design takes local aspirations seriously. The result, we hope, will be more effective programs for revitalising languages and for promoting strong identity, resilience, and wellbeing.

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