

# Language revival must consider social and mental health issues

July 21 2015, by Kate Bourne

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A University of Adelaide linguistics expert says the revival of an Aboriginal language in South Australia could serve as the first "test case" for the potential mental health benefits of reclaiming "sleeping beauty" languages.

Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann, Australia's only Chair of Endangered Languages, says activities to resurrect the Barngarla Aboriginal language – with the Barngarla communities of Eyre Peninsula – offer hope in the quest to better understand the significant relationship between linguistic continuity, and social and personal wellbeing.

"A study in British Columbia, Canada, has demonstrated a correlation between a lack of conversational skills in the native Aboriginal language and youth suicide rates – in communities whose language was subject to linguisticide (language killing), youth suicide was frequent," says Professor Zuckermann, Professor of Linguistics and Endangered Languages at the University of Adelaide, and elected member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Foundation for Endangered Languages.

"But so far there has been no systematic quantitative study of the impact of language revival (rather than loss) on wellbeing, [mental health](#) and suicide ideation. This is partly because language reclamation is still rare and in its infancy."

The Barngarla community has worked to reclaim their language in close

collaboration with Professor Zuckermann since 2011.

"Since colonisation, Indigenous Australian people have suffered the effects of wide-scale linguicide," Professor Zuckermann says. "Out of 330 Aboriginal languages, only 13 are alive and kicking today."

"Language loss, and the consequent lack of cultural autonomy, intellectual sovereignty and spirituality – not to mention the dependence on the coloniser's tongue – unfortunately increase the phenomena of disempowerment, self-loathing and suicide."

"Colonised people all over the globe sometimes hate not only the colonisers but also themselves," he says.

He says efforts to reclaim hibernating Aboriginal tongues – such as those seen with the Barngarla community – reflect the desire to recover one's identity and reconnect with one's ancestors.

"I have noticed, qualitatively, that language reclamation is often empowering for those involved. It strengthens one's soul and validates one's pride, dignity and sense of cultural heritage," Professor Zuckermann says.

"However, I plan to also conduct quantitative research in Revivalistics, the new trans-disciplinary field of enquiry. So that we can improve our approaches to reviving languages, and thoroughly and systematically evaluate its impact on individuals and communities."

Provided by University of Adelaide

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