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Pushing the paradigm of language recovery: the cases of Basque and Nawat

How can we best prepare ourselves to help communities effectively to recover their failing languages? Is there a “language recovery (LR) paradigm” that really works? If so, LR facilitators who come from a theoretical linguistic background may need to shift paradigms because LR is an applied field. But where “revitalization” efforts are failing, maybe LR’s own conventional wisdom needs an upgrade too, for a good paradigm should not be one deduced from a priori assumptions, but inferred from successful cases. In this talk I will discuss two cases I view as “successful” within different contexts, those of Basque and Nawat.

Language recovery is a drive to nurse threatened languages back to health and life, which often represents a last chance, a final battle against prevailing trends and the clock. Especially in the early stages, LR efforts need to be led by informed romantics rather than uninspired technocrats. Although there is no preordained script, and in the heat of the fray there is rarely time to step back far enough to construct abstract schemata to fully explain what is happening, I will try to “connect some dots” and raise a few interesting questions in this talk.