

Reversing Music Shift: A Case Study and a Lot of Questions from Papua New Guinea

Language endangerment is gaining increasing attention from international media outlets, with the plight of last speakers earning the public's sympathy. But sociolinguists have been working for a long time to understand language shift and, in some cases, work to reverse the shift. Joshua Fishman, for example, proposed the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS),¹ a structure for evaluating a language's vitality. The GIDS is not only an assessment of a language's current vitality, but it also guides efforts to reverse language shift and strengthen a weakening language. Language is an important key to community health, but other cultural elements should not be neglected.

My experience living in Papua New Guinea since 2002 has shown me that indigenous musics are disappearing at a rate that rivals that of languages. What I have observed is not simply *change* at a natural, expected pace, but rather a *discarding* of music skills, a breakdown in transmission of local music knowledge. This process leads to the detriment of a community's creative expression. Practical skills for indigenous music production—instrument making, composition, teaching—are lost, while experience creating in recently introduced music styles is still sparse. This restricts local community members' creative, musical output. The younger generation regrets the loss of traditional music skills, but they feel helpless to regain what has been lost.

After my first two of three years living with the Alamblak people—a language community of approximately 1500 speakers in Papua New Guinea's East Sepik Province—I wanted to evaluate the state of music knowledge with more precision than simply my own observations. I first created a music survey, based on the sociolinguist's language survey methodology. The music survey included two parts: a recorded text test and a self-evaluation questionnaire. Content of the survey featured three Alamblak music styles, and recent introductions. Nearly ten percent of the Alamblak speakers took the survey, and I shared the results—primarily visually, with graphs—with the Alamblak people. It was one visual way of explaining to them the current change processes in the community.

In order to facilitate discussion about possible revitalization of Alamblak musics, I also adapted Fishman's 8-stage GIDS into a 7-stage Graded Music Shift Scale (GMSS). I placed the three local music forms on this scale and talked with community members about revitalization possibilities. Some of those revitalization activities have now been tried, with varying success.

My presentation explains this method for bridging sociolinguistics and ethnomusicology: the background of the Alamblak case study, the survey procedure, and the results and follow-up efforts. I then pose broader questions about music endangerment and revitalization. The case study reveals a number of fundamental differences between language and music—differences that raise concerns about the ultimate goal of reversing music shift:

- Which aspect of music will indigenous music advocates focus on as the basic element that must persist?
- When is a music style viable?

1 Joshua Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (Clevedon [UK]: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1991).

- Is there a “music comprehension” analogous to language comprehension? What is adequate understanding of a music style?
- Is Fishman's primary emphasis on intergenerational transmission of language applicable to the transmission of music knowledge?

The progress reports on reversing language shift in Fishman's edited volume—*Can Threatened Languages Be Saved?*²—present a rather bleak picture of the potential for success. Although international awareness of endangered languages is increasing, actual triumphs in such languages seem small, and the setbacks daunting. Reports of dying languages multiply, but happier news of stabilizing languages is scarce.³ One wonders whether revitalization of a language's related expressive arts will be easier than reversing language shift. And is linguist Claude Hagège right to conclude that “arts play a rather limited role in the survival of a language,”⁴ or will the strengthening of the arts actually aid language revitalization? Such questions are vital for languages and expressive arts in Papua New Guinea and beyond.

2 Joshua Fishman, *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved? Reversing Language Shift, Revisited: A 21st Century Perspective* (Clevedon [UK]: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2001).

3 But not nonexistent. See, for example, Michael Cahill, “From Endangered to Less Endangered: Case Histories from Brazil and Papua New Guinea,” 2004, <http://www.sil.org/silewp/2004/silewp2004-004.htm>.

4 Claude Hagège, “Q and A: The Death of Languages,” <http://schott.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/12/16/q-and-a-the-death-of-languages/>.