

PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE REVIVAL

GRAMMAR PATHWAYS

Grammar is just another word for the patterns of your language when you join words together. If you are using your Language words without learning its grammar, you will naturally use the patterns of English for your language.

PATHWAYS IN LANGUAGE REVIVAL PROGRAMS

Different language programs have different approaches to reviving grammar, and different levels of emphasis on how important it is. The pathway you choose is up to you.

One step at a time - Some people add elements of grammar gradually into their translation work. They may do this over several versions of the same translation, or they may focus on one aspect, such as pronouns, for some time before adding in the next level.



'What is / This is' pattern (Wiradjuri - Parkes)

Some people teach Language with its traditional grammar right from the start, but only introduce one new pattern at a time. This means a learner can only say one or two types of things at a given stage (such as where someone is or where they are going), but it has the advantage of always keeping Language in its own patterns. One way of doing this is to teach people to copy a formula - set ways of saying things - and then adapting this to different situations by changing just one word.

For other people, it is more important to focus on words and meanings, Language in cultural reclamation, and the confidence of their community to have a go. Naming animals, colours, body parts and so on, can be very important to inspire people, and get them started using Language. It can also be vital within your cultural learning program, as the language provides windows into layers of meaning that the English words for plants etc. do not connect with. You can also use many single words, in stories or songs etc., with English as the base. This lets people use Language in more extended contexts, while still staying within what feels familiar and easy.

How do we learn the grammar?

Find out which of these you have available to you:

1. Community grammar book or section in your dictionary. You may also like to get help interpreting these.
2. Language learning books or CDs
3. Regional Language Centres will have resources and trained people, and may be able to run workshops.
4. Assistance from a university that runs linguistics courses. Staff need 'community service' opportunities and PhD students need 'fieldwork experience'. This can be a good way to get training and resources for your community.
5. Targeted training for your language workers. There may be a TAFE course, or training through a Language Centre, AIATSIS and so on. Ask through your networks.

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THOUGHTS ABOUT GRAMMAR

“People when they first start, they’re very tentative, aren’t they? And they start it off just trying to do small things, and keep it at a very basic level. But then at some point, they realise that they’ve got to do more than that. And that’s been a bit of an issue. I think people get a little stuck on the grammar stuff. And you’ve gotta really find creative ways of doing it, if people are finding it hard to move to that stage of putting words together.” - Jeanie Bell

“I don’t really do grammar. I just teach em, and it might be based along English way. So we might say, ‘Thindu jirrah’, which translates, ‘This is a kangaroo’. Because that’s how they’re trying to fit it in, into their English structure. If I try to do it in the proper Aboriginal grammatical way, then they’re just all mixed up. So we just wanna get em talkin’. And all of that will come eventually. Like, this is the proper way that you actually put those things. And this is the marker that you add to it. But even when I tell em that you put this marker on it for this reason, I show em the same in English. So I say, ‘So, you’ve got the word jump, and I want you to tell me it has already happened. So that is called past tense. What do you add to it?’ But we never go there until they’re really comfortable.” - Lynnette Solomon-Dent

“With Wathaurong, the grammatical structure is the same as Wemba Wemba. And so you say, ‘Righto, if they’re saying this is how you construct that sentence, then we probably should construct it the same way’. You make that guess.” - Bruce Pascoe

“All we need is that grammar and dictionary to be published, and we can sit down and we can create. It’s a stepping stone for more things to happen.” - Jenni Beer

“I think sometimes we put the cart before the horse. I know that having a grammar is not an Aboriginal concept as such, but nor are all the other things which are being produced. Having a dictionary is not an Aboriginal concept of the language. I see it all the time, Language programs around the country, stuff happening, and it’s like – okay, where’s your grammar behind the scenes? How do you build a house? You gotta have your plans. You’ve gotta have your guidelines, your standards in place, to how the frame gets together. To build a motor car. Ford, Holden, Toyota, they all have, behind the scenes, the manual. How it’s to be built. We had to have that in place before we could start.” - Daryn McKenny

“Once you’ve got that pattern in the grammar, you keep following that pattern. And so that goes back also looking at more study on neighbouring Countries, and what’s been recorded in their grammar and structure and patterns. Maybe through the similarities of both Language groups, or Language groups next door, neighbouring Countries. Then, if we need to extend the grammar even further, we could probably borrow from one to the other. Again, that’s more research.” - Tom Kinchela