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*The Language Warrior's Manifesto: How to Keep Our Languages
Alive No Matter the Odds* by Anton Treuer (review)

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Book Review

The Language Warrior's Manifesto: How to Keep Our Languages Alive No Matter the Odds. ANTON TREUER. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2020. Pp. 208. \$18.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Mark Turin, *University of British Columbia, Vancouver*

“Language loss is self-perpetuating. All that’s necessary for most languages to die is for us to do too little or nothing” (p. 44), writes Anton Treuer, in what is perhaps his most personal book to date. Equal parts motivational self-help guide for language workers and gripping narrative of his own language-learning journey to reclaim Ojibwe, the title of Treuer’s monograph is well-chosen. The book does exactly what it says it will do on the cover.

Lucid and refreshingly free of footnotes and jargon, Treuer opens the book by situating language as integral to all aspects of culture and well-being. The first chapter answers many of the implicit and prejudiced questions that continue to be asked about the value of Indigenous languages in the modern world. In the following chapters, Treuer goes on to identify the many challenges to successful language revitalization and outlines his own journey into this work. Finally, in a colossal ninety-page chapter, Treuer widens the frame to discuss effective strategies for community-based language reclamation in North America and beyond. The structure of the book is part of its message, a convincing narrative arc from why we should care to what we can do about it and how we can do it.

After decades of work and thousands of miles driving back and forth between elders and cultural gatherings, Treuer is proud to describe himself as a fluent speaker of Ojibwe. This is no small achievement, all the more noteworthy because the author did not grow up with the language: he and his mother’s family were severed from it through the compounded violence of colonization and dispossession (cf. Pine and Turin 2017). “Language revitalization is nothing short of a pathway to liberation. When we shake off the yoke of colonization, we no longer have to be defined by that history. We don’t become decolonized. We become liberated—unconquered” (p. 168), writes Treuer, in a particularly powerful section in this memorable book. Now an accomplished professor at Bemidji State University in Minnesota and the author of nineteen books, Treuer has spent much of his career reclaiming Ojibwe—his linguistic birthright.

Treuer’s story, while not unique, is both motivational and grounded. He takes the time to recognize others, naming and uplifting all of his teachers, past and present. While noting the important “upswell” (p. 4) in language work elsewhere, Treuer also does not shy away from hard facts. There are no quick fixes, and no silver bullets to bringing a language back: language revitalization requires focus, commitment, dedication, consultation, and years of hard work. “We cannot wish our languages back to health. We cannot teach them if we don’t first learn them. We cannot lead in their revitalization from the sidelines,” he writes (p. 12). In this, Treuer is very much in the Darryl Kipp school of language revitalization that encourages “activists to *show* rather than *tell* the importance of language” (p. 167). The late and greatly missed Darryl Kipp—whom Treuer acknowledges and references—was a Blackfoot language teacher and served as founding director of the Piegan Institute. His unvarnished descriptions of the dual complexity and urgency of language revitalization continue to have great currency in the field.

Treuer is a deep well of good counsel and pedagogically informed positions for those looking to develop successful language programs. On financing, a perpetual struggle for

many Indigenous language programs, Treuer soberly reminds us that “people fund strength, not need” (p. 152). Retransmission is key to success: “take everything you learn and teach it to at least four other people” (p. 116). While monolingual and immersive language learning opportunities can create new speakers, Treuer is dismissive of bilingual programming, noting that everyone “knows English too well. It’s like pouring dye into a pitcher of water. You just can’t get it out” (p. 99). Treuer is not being antagonistic or seeking confrontation when making such strident statements, he is simply writing from experience.

Throughout his energetic text, Treuer reminds us that individuals are their own instrument in the work of language revitalization. Personal effort lies at the heart of success. Resilience and inner strength are indispensable assets, not only to survive the structural racism baked into English-dominant settler spaces, but also because intergenerational trauma can manifest as internalized lateral violence within communities. “Language warriors,” writes Treuer, “need super-thick, elephantlike skin to deal with all the attacks” (p. 40). It is better to under-promise and over-deliver than to over-promise and under-deliver, we learn, as “disappointment is inversely proportional to expectations” (p. 45).

Full of positive reinforcement and hopeful lyricism, this is, at its core, a defiant book about Indigenous resurgence, survival, and sovereignty. With homage paid to Audre Lorde and Paulo Freire, Treuer has done the years of work to be able to write with such authority. He has witnessed that the master’s tools will never succeed in dismantling the master’s house, or as Treuer so devastatingly puts it: “the educational system that ignores us and denigrates our existence will not be the source of our liberation” (p. 23). Instead, in Treuer’s vivid analysis, Indigenous languages urgently need to be normalized, once again making them the natural medium for everyday interaction. Getting there, as he writes on his companion website which hosts many additional resources, requires seeing Indigenous languages as melting “the glue for colonial thinking which has been fundamentally dehumanizing to indigenous people” (<https://antontreuer.com/about>).

On the path to normalization, all manner of approaches and groups can be leveraged to make incremental gains. Signage, for example, “doesn’t produce speakers, but it acculturates everyone to seeing the target language in public spaces. That means the language isn’t just used for ceremonies. It sparks curiosity” (p. 161). Likewise, non-Indigenous white allies, like this reviewer, are welcomed—generously, I should add—but are necessarily secondary: “they can’t revitalize Ojibwe for us, but they can help catalyze our efforts and develop important relationships to magnify the impact of what we do” (p. 122). I would encourage non-Indigenous scholars to consider incorporating chapters of Treuer’s work into their classes on language documentation, conservation, and revitalization, as I plan to do.

Dynamic and personal, *The Language Warrior’s Manifesto* is a masterclass in the use of language to inspire and the power of language to explain. “Be here for the people seven generations from now—when nobody knows your names,” Treuer writes (p. 165). The approachability of the book helps it to become a conversation with the reader while at the same time functioning as an instructional text full of insights that can be harnessed. Treuer sets up no theoretical mountains for the reader to scale. Instead, he invites us to commit to the work of language revival and be his companion in this autobiographical walk with language. This makes his book a gift in the truest sense, and one that I have already recommended to community partners and students who have long been searching for a text that was designed to support them in their intergenerational journey to re-energize and revitalize their languages.

The late Anna Gibbs was one of Treuer’s language teachers and great mentors. She shared a proverb with the author, which he in turn has generously shared with us:

“every time they tried to bury us, they didn’t realize that we were the seeds” (p. 168). Treuer is a living manifestation of that truth.

Reference

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