

Miami Language Reclamation in the Home: A Case Study

by

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## Abstract

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We are in the midst of a worldwide movement of language revitalization in which indigenous peoples are reclaiming their histories, cultures, and identities. This dissertation reports on a successful example of reclamation. Deemed “extinct” in the 1960s when the only speaker of the language passed away, the Miami language underwent a 30-year period of silence. However, working with 300 years of documentation, the Miami community has begun the long process of bringing the language back. Tribal member Daryl Baldwin is a leader in this process; he began learning the language in the early 1990s and using it with his family. Daryl, his wife, and their first two children have since become conversationally proficient. Two more children were born in the late 1990s and are being raised with Miami as a native language. The family members also play an instrumental role in a community-wide process of language and cultural revitalization.

This study explores the Baldwin family’s language reclamation process. Its special focus is on the two younger children’s language development – that is, how they are acquiring the language and being socialized to speak it in this unique social situation. I adopt an ecological model of studying language

development by considering all factors that play into this issue. These include the history of the language itself, the family's actual patterns of use, their language ideologies, and general cognitive principles of language acquisition.

Part I of this dissertation presents the context in which the younger children's language development is taking place. I describe the history and structure of the language, how this family initially went about reclaiming it, and the design of this project as a participant-observation study in which my presence became a factor. Part II then examines the younger children's actual language development through a series of case studies. I show that they are successfully acquiring the grammar of the language and are also developing a positive orientation toward the language that bodes well for its continued use. In Part III, I conclude that the reclamation of a sleeping language as a language of daily communication is clearly possible.

For my grandparents, Chief Floyd Leonard and Pat Leonard

# MIAMI LANGUAGE RECLAMATION IN THE HOME: A CASE STUDY

## *Table of Contents*

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>1.1 Introducing the Study’s Participants .....</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1.1 The Baldwin Family.....	4
1.1.2 The “Researcher” .....	6
<b>1.2 Overview: Language Reclamation in Practice.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1.3 Dissertation Outline .....</b>	<b>16</b>
 <b>PART I – THE CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT</b> 	
CHAPTER 2 – ON THE MIAMI LANGUAGE.....	21
<b>2.1 The Social Context of Miami .....</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1.1 Miami as a Sleeping Language.....	22
2.1.2 Historical Language Shift in the Miami Community.....	24
<b>2.2 The Baldwins’ Story.....</b>	<b>30</b>
2.2.1 The Legend of the Baldwins’ Reclamation of Miami.....	30
2.2.2 The Baldwins’ Story Detailed – Motivations & Challenges .....	32
<b>2.3 A Sketch of Modern Miami, as Spoken by the Baldwins.....</b>	<b>51</b>
2.3.1 Structural Overview .....	52
2.3.2 Phonology .....	53
2.3.2.1 Consonants.....	53
2.3.2.2 Vowels .....	55
2.3.3 Selected Language Changes & Their Social Implications.....	56
2.3.3.1 Changes in Pronunciation: Overview .....	56
2.3.3.1.1 Changes in Stress .....	60
2.3.3.1.2 Changes in Preaspiration Patterns .....	60
2.3.3.2 Other Anglicization.....	62
2.3.4 Views About Language Change .....	64
2.3.5 Lexical Innovation Ideology & Practice.....	66
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGICAL PRACTICES & OUTCOMES.....	72
<b>3.1 Research Methods &amp; Their Sociological Underpinnings .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>3.2 Methods for Assessing Productivity .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>3.3 Collaboration as a Model of Research .....</b>	<b>87</b>
3.3.1 The Baldwins as “Human Subjects” .....	89
3.3.2 Results of Following This Research Model.....	92
<b>3.4 Direct Socialization as a Method in this Study .....</b>	<b>95</b>

<b>3.5 Response to Possible Criticisms of This Research Design .....</b>	<b>99</b>
3.5.1 Associated Findings .....	102
 <b>CHAPTER 4 – LIFE &amp; LANGUAGE IN THE BALDWIN HOME .....</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>4.1 Guiding Ideologies.....</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>4.2 Tapaahsia Farm as myaamionki.....</b>	<b>111</b>
4.2.1 The Farm Lifestyle .....	116
4.2.2 Other Miami Language Domains .....	118
<b>4.3 Language in School .....</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>4.4 Myaamia Beyond the Home.....</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>4.5 The Prestige of Miami.....</b>	<b>132</b>
4.5.1 The Older Children.....	133
4.5.2 The Younger Children.....	138
 <b>PART II – THE YOUNGER CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT</b>	
 <b>CHAPTER 5 – ACQUISITION: OVERVIEW &amp; PREDICTIONS .....</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>5.1 Operating Principles of Acquisition .....</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>5.2 Age Predictions as Guided by Studies of Other Synthetic Languages.....</b>	<b>148</b>
<b>5.3 The Bilingualism Factor .....</b>	<b>150</b>
5.3.1 Bilingualism's Effect on Morphological Acquisition .....	150
5.3.2 Bilingualism's Effects on Lexical Acquisition.....	151
<b>5.4 A Language Socialization Model.....</b>	<b>154</b>
5.4.1 Socialization & Lexical Choice.....	155
5.4.2 Socialization as Revealed Through Code Switching Ideology .....	157
5.4.3 Language Input as Guided by Socialization Practices .....	159
<b>5.5 Mixing the Models .....</b>	<b>161</b>
 <b>CHAPTER 6 – THE YOUNGER CHILDREN'S ACQUISITION .....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>6.1 Preliminary Predictions.....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>6.2 Summary of Findings.....</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>6.3 Case Study I – Noun Suffixes.....</b>	<b>164</b>
6.3.1 A Sketch of Miami Nouns .....	164
6.3.2 Acquisition of Nominal Plural Marking .....	166
6.3.2.1 Awan's Nouns .....	172
6.3.3 Novel Forms & Usages .....	173
6.3.3.1 The Creation & Spread of <i>-zooki</i> , a Novel Suffix .....	174
<b>6.4 Case Study II – Verb Suffixes.....</b>	<b>178</b>

6.4.1	A Sketch of Miami Verbs .....	178
6.4.2	Acquisition of Verb Suffixes .....	181
6.4.3	Novel Forms & Usages .....	184
6.4.3.1	Filler Syllables.....	184
6.4.3.2	Amehk’s Novel Person Classification .....	187
<b>6.5</b>	<b>Case Study III – Possessive Prefixes (Nouns).....</b>	<b>191</b>
6.5.1	Possessive Prefixes Overview .....	191
6.5.2	Possessive Prefix Acquisition.....	193
6.5.3	Novel Usages of Kinship Terms.....	196
<b>6.6</b>	<b>The First Two Years – Summary.....</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7 – ON TEACHING &amp; LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT .....</b>		<b>203</b>
<b>7.1</b>	<b>Summary of Games .....</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>7.2</b>	<b>Results .....</b>	<b>207</b>
7.2.1	Initial Results .....	207
7.2.2	After Two Months .....	208
7.2.2.1	On <i>-kya</i> ‘mother’ (A) .....	208
7.2.2.2	On <i>-nehki</i> ‘hand’ (B).....	209
7.2.2.3	On <i>-iipita</i> ‘teeth’ (C) .....	209
7.2.2.4	On <i>naapinaakani</i> ‘shirt’ (D).....	210
<b>7.3</b>	<b>Social Implications .....</b>	<b>214</b>
7.3.1	Early Implications .....	214
7.3.2	Long-Term Results.....	215
<b>7.4</b>	<b>The Role of Teaching in Language Reclamation.....</b>	<b>216</b>
<b>PART III – LOOKING TO THE FUTURE</b>		
<b>CHAPTER 8 – CONCLUSIONS, PREDICTIONS, &amp; IMPLICATIONS .....</b>		<b>219</b>
<b>8.1</b>	<b>Summary of the Baldwins’ Success .....</b>	<b>219</b>
<b>8.2</b>	<b>Predictions on Future Language Development .....</b>	<b>220</b>
<b>8.3</b>	<b>Theoretical Implications.....</b>	<b>222</b>
APPENDIX I: FIELDWORK DATES.....		226
APPENDIX II: TEXTS (NATURAL CONVERSATIONS) .....		227
APPENDIX III: TEXTS (“MAKING CORNBREAD” EXERCISE) .....		233
APPENDIX IV: ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE GAME.....		249
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....		250

## List of Figures

Figure 1 – Place and Manner of Articulation of Miami Consonants.....	54
Figure 2 – Impressionistic Height & Backness of Baldwins’ Vowels.....	56
Figure 3 – Number Suffixes .....	165
Figure 4 – Source of Novel Pluralizing Suffix:.....	175
Figure 5 – Selected A.I. (Animate Intransitive) Person/Number Suffixes .....	179
Figure 6 – Initial Change.....	181
Figure 7 – Commonly Used Kinship Terms.....	193
Figure 8 – Forms Used in Noun Matching Game Level I .....	206
Figure 9 – Forms Used in Noun Matching Game Level II.....	249

## List of Images

Image 1 – A <i>kiinteelintaakani</i> ‘computer’ Label.....	113
Image 2 – Bilingual List of Bird Names on Wall in Baldwins’ Dining Room.....	114
Image 3 – Amehk, Ciinkwia, & Keemaacimwiihkwa (right to left) teach another Miami child (far left) how to play the Moccasin Game (June 3, 2004) .....	119
Image 4 – Jar Game (picture taken March 30, 2007) .....	139
Image 5 – Body Part Game .....	205
Image 6 – Weather Chart Used in School.....	213