

DEFINING LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

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Introduction

Many ethnolinguistic communities desire to strengthen community bonds and identity through a shared but growing knowledge of their historical language practice. Many times this is labeled *Language Revitalization*. However, this term is anchored linguistically and cognitively in past experience. A past-based anchoring can have limiting impacts on future pathways of evolution. I suggest that through an analysis of language revitalization practice that a more liberating and open-ended framing is captured by the term *Language Development*. Language development respects the intentional activities a community takes regarding their communication activities and prepares a community to secure the needed infrastructure for flourishing across their community. Language revitalization is discussed as the natural progression of language documentation. Its efforts are cast as the socially responsible actions to take following the decline of instrumentality of a language of identity. It is also often cast in the frame of bilingualism where the language agents influencing vitality are associated with languages of national identity.

Terminology, Ideology, & Worldview

Most communities around the globe function with some level of multilingualism, with **one language, frequently tied to community identity (blue zone)**. The ratios of use, functions of use, and instrumentality of these languages constantly fluctuate through time, creating a diverse sociology of language. **The communicative competency of a community may exist in one or more languages, but is always at 100%**. Communities may cease to use **some languages (red zone)**. This allows communicative functions to be explored in other languages (white zone), while **yet other languages may be introduced (yellow zone)** at some future time.

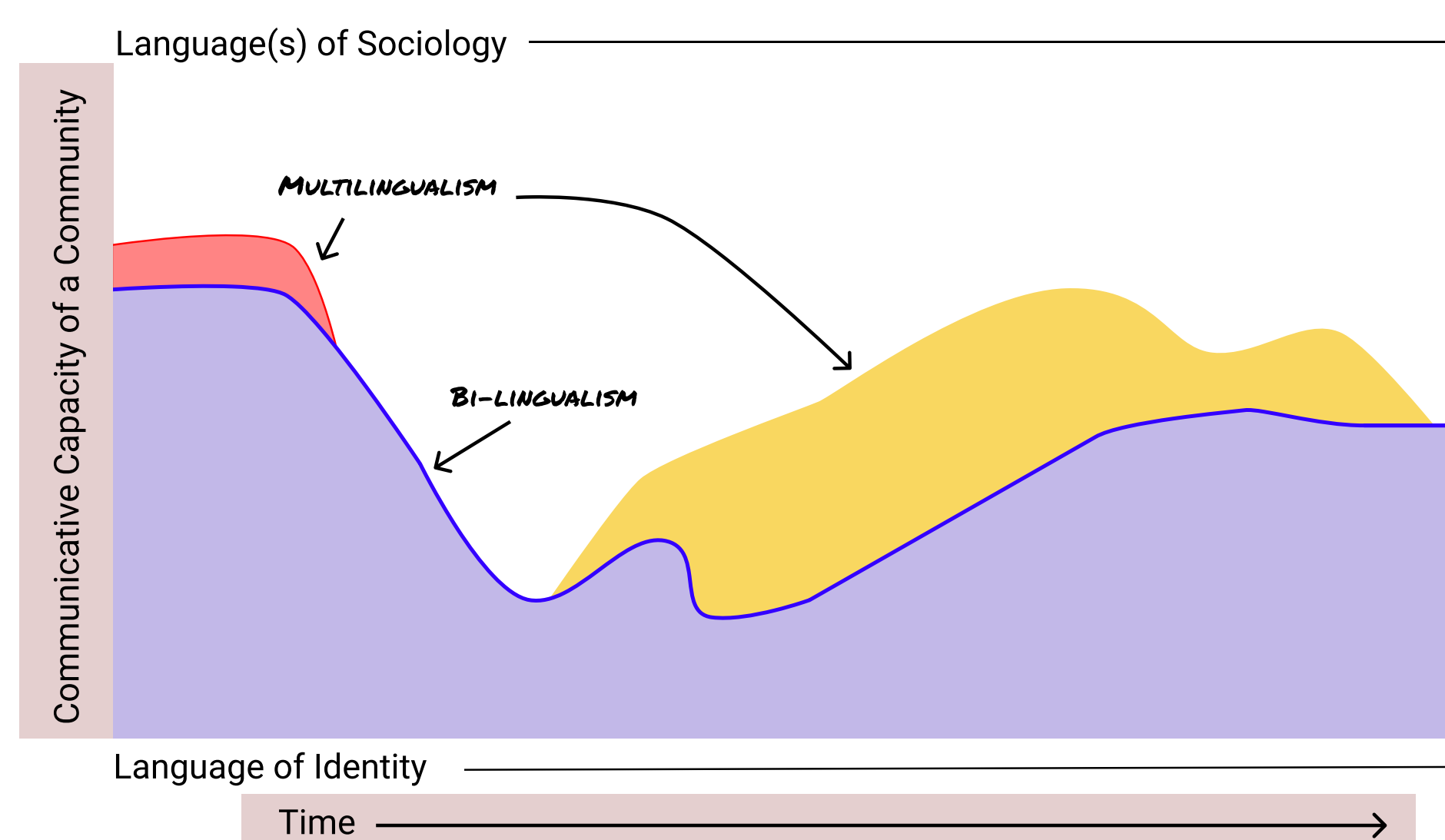


Fig. 1: Identity and Language competency vary in popularity across communities.

Language revitalization has as its goal the increased instrumentality of the language of identity. However, the term *revitalization* brings with it the frame that the language is going to be restored to some former glory—much like the phrase: “Make America great again”. The term suggests that the instrumentality of the language is going to be restored. Restoration has at its core the ideal of some past state which in many contexts may have neither been fully monolingual. Further, that past state may not be able to meet current communicative requirements. So even with *revitalization*, there remains a gap between what *was* and what *is needed today* for communities to flourish. **What kind of language restoration can fill a gap which was never the history of the community?**

A Reframed Narrative

The terminological framing of the word *revitalization* still leaves a gap in the total communicative competency for communities which have always been multilingual. The communicative needs of these communities may never have been met through monolingualism, but more problematically, communicative needs have changed through time—being shaped by forces such as urbanization, population movements, and industrialization.

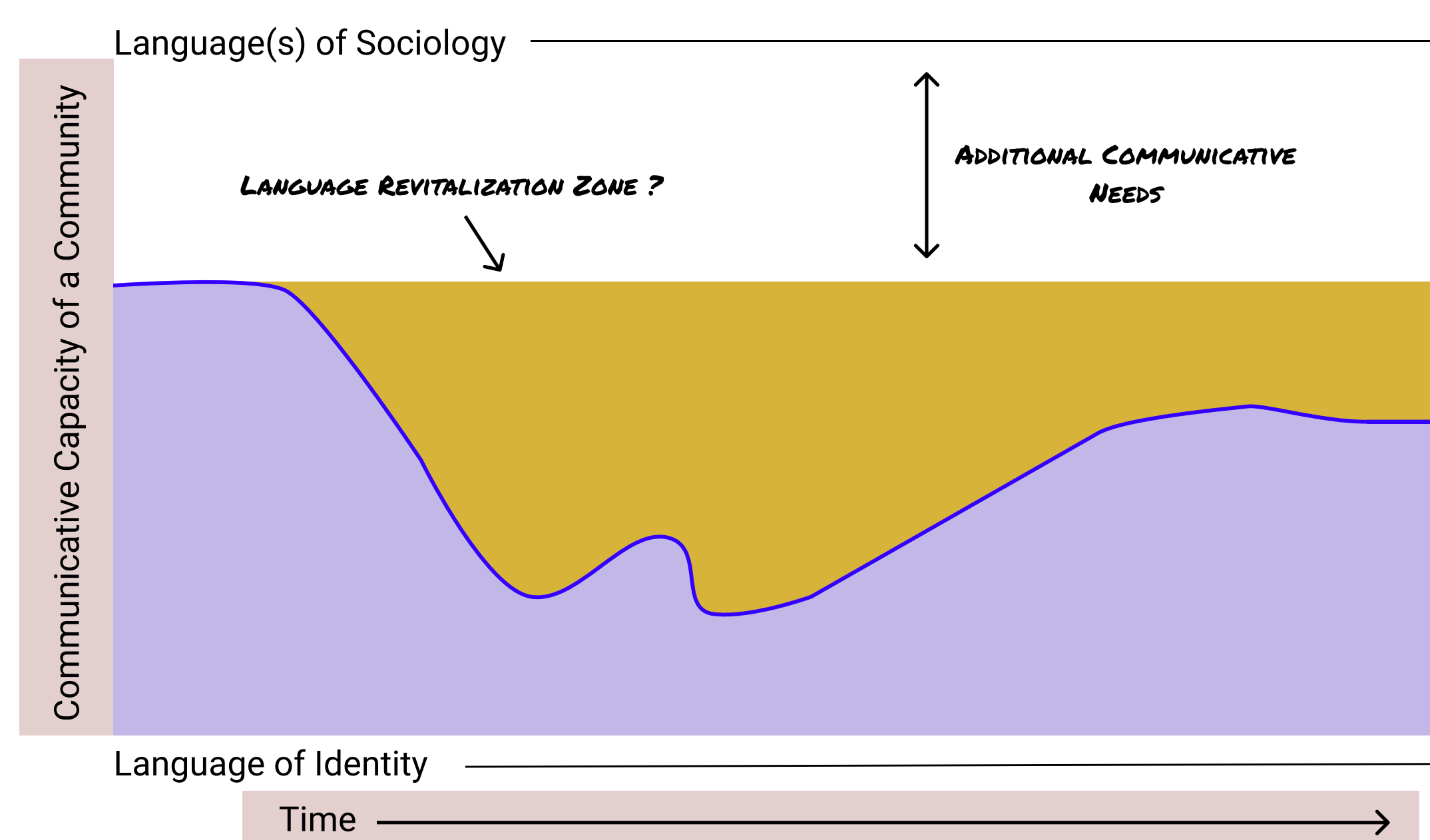


Fig. 2: Language Revitalization has a big gap.

In bilingual situations we need terms which can apply to both the language of identity and the language of wider function. Is the acclaimed *Language Loss* really just *Language Revitalization* of the language of wider social engagement?

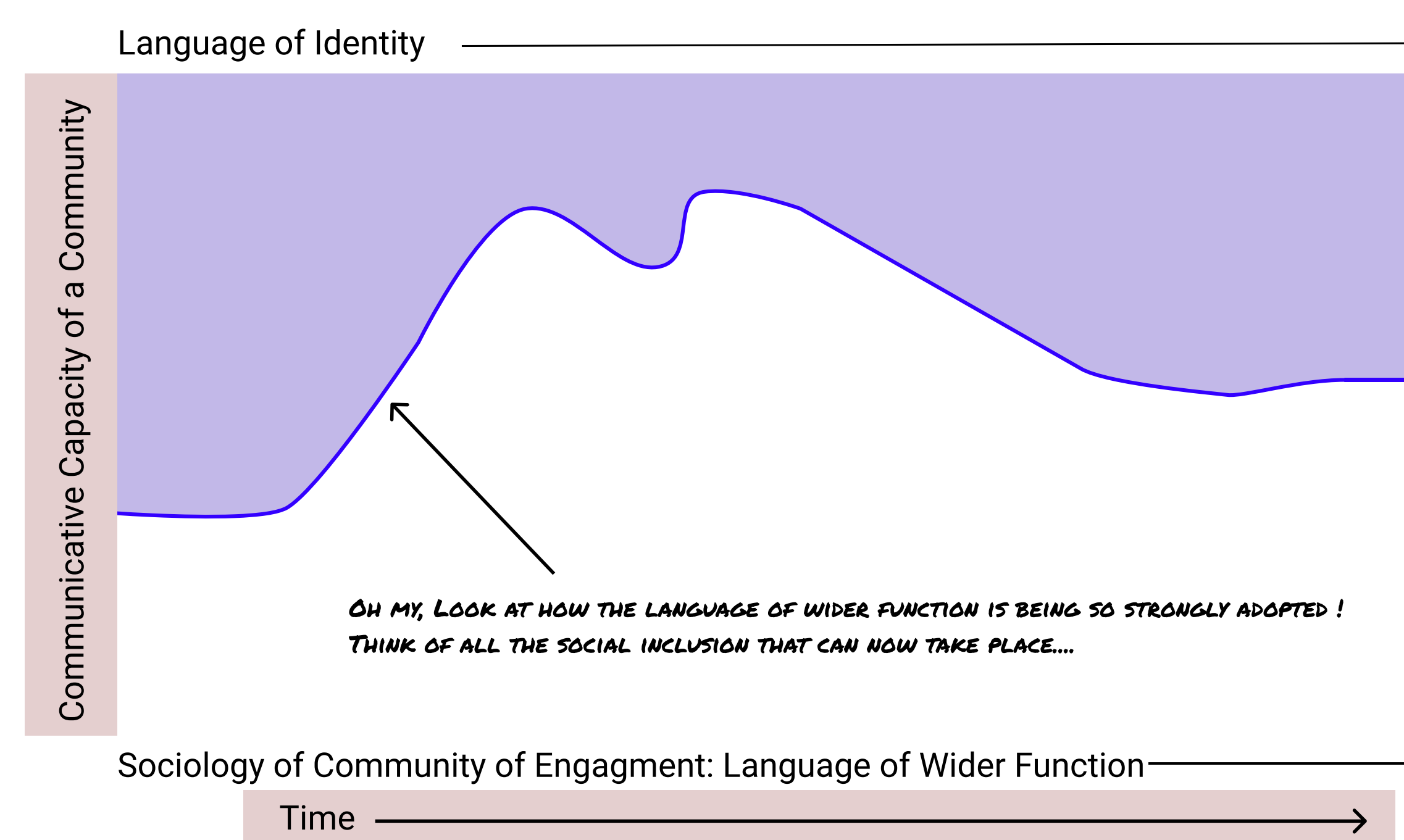


Fig. 3: Is the increase in instrumentality of the language of wider social function also language revitalization?

The narrative for language revitalization portrays aggressor languages as swallowing the voice of minority languages—a narrative compatible with a victim and trauma based past orientation focus. The context often assumes a bilingual context. However, in a multilingual environment, we can see that we need a new descriptive term; a new narrative for the increase or decrease in the instrumentality of a language. A term with future orientation.

Language Development

Language development takes a forward trajectory perspective. It seeks to build infrastructure for flourishing independent of former limits of the language.

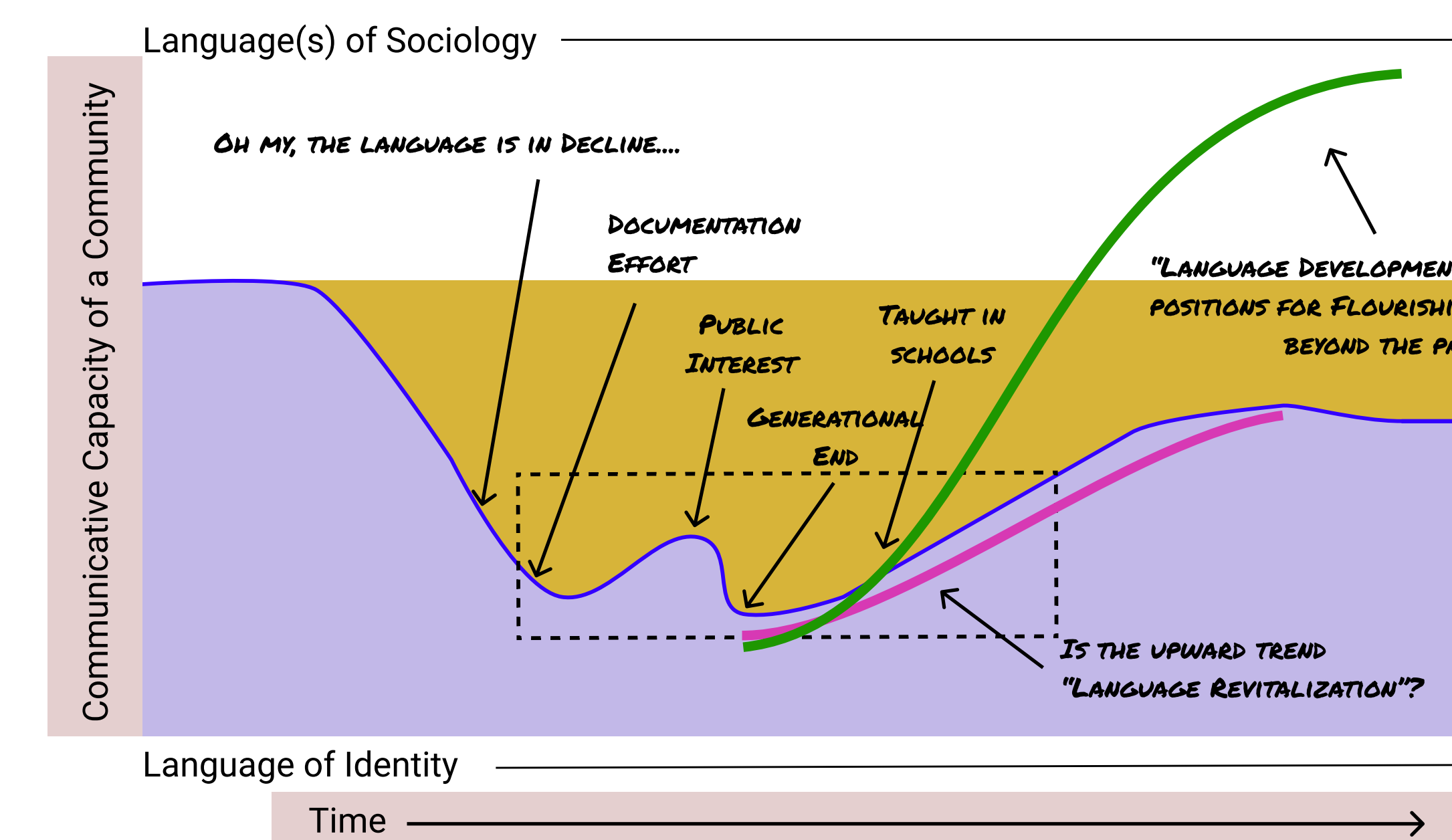


Fig. 4: Proper planning and infrastructure support can take communicative capacity beyond past social levels.

Language revitalization programs with community participation often follow from a recognition that the general use of a language of identity is diminishing. Figure 4 illustrates critical points of social recognition in the evolution of communities. The instrumentality of the language is waning. The language is becoming more objectified across the community. Public interest rises in the language just prior to the loss of the last generation of fluent speakers. Eventually, the language might even be taught in schools to increase community awareness. However, *Language Development* taps into a future oriented mindset and vocabulary of infrastructure and community development. It infers the establishment of a goal for community utility and a defined instrumentality for the language.

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