

**WE HAS SEEN THE ENEMY AND IT IS US:
THE ENDANGERED LANGUAGES ISSUE
AS A HOPELESS CAUSE**

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Linguists claim to be concerned about the endangered languages issue. In reality, nothing substantial is being done about it. There are three main reasons for this. First, linguistics as a discipline is dominated by abstract theoretical concerns in which fieldwork plays a minor part. Second, those dedicated linguists who are involved in basic documentation of endangered languages are drawn into and have their time sapped by language revitalization and linguistic social work projects. Third, linguistic Ph.D. students from non-Western developing countries have been allowed to write grammars of their own languages by introspection and thus have not been trained in field work techniques. Nor have they been encouraged to conduct basic research on other (often endangered) languages in their home countries. In sum, linguists will continue to hold conference after conference in which they decry the inexorable loss of human languages around the globe, but in fact little will be done to provide a scientific record of these languages before they die away.

1.0 Introduction

The figure often bandied about, taken from statements by Michael Krauss 1992, is that there are some 6,000 languages in the world, half of which are likely to be lost within the next century. But, as he points out, the situation is even worse: of these 3,000 remaining, only 600 have a real chance of survival, i.e., if the trend persists, some 90% of the world's languages will be lost. The question Krauss (1992: 7) poses is: 'What are we linguists doing to prepare for this or to prevent this catastrophic destruction of the linguistic world?'

It is only within the past ten or so years that linguists have begun to focus on this issue and to stress the point that the disappearance of languages and linguistic diversity is a major loss to linguistic scholarship and science. Since the endangered languages issue was brought to the fore, however, it has caught the attention of the linguistics profession and has stimulated a large amount of activity. There have been a variety of conferences on the subject and the appearance of a number of major publications, including Brenzinger, Heine, & Sommer 1991, Fishman 1991, Robins & Uhlenbeck 1991, Brenzinger 1998, Grenoble & Whaley 1998, and Matsumura 1998. The lead article in the March 1992 issue of *Language*, written

by a group of distinguished linguists, was devoted to the matter (see Hale et al. 1992).

Even more striking has been the creation of organizations and activities devoted to the topic. For example, the Linguistic Society of America has a standing Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation; there is a Foundation for Endangered Languages at the University of Bristol, UK, and an International Clearing House for Endangered Languages at the University of Tokyo. UNESCO is involved in the preparation of an Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing. Non-profit foundations are also springing up, e.g., the Endangered Languages Fund (New Haven) and Terralingua, Partnerships for Linguistic and Biological Diversity (Hancock, Michigan).

Although I think that Marianne Mithun (1998:163) is stretching it when she states, 'At long last the tragedy of language loss worldwide has begun to enter the public conscious [sic],' it is true that awareness of the issue is starting to extend beyond the narrow confines of professional linguists. Here one can cite the informative article that appeared in the *New York Times* (Brooke 1998) and a short piece found in *Newsweek* (Raymond 1998).

My intention here is not to raise the question of why languages disappear (see Mufwene, this volume). Nor do I want to get into the sensitive question of whether it makes any sense to try to renew or revive dying languages (see Ladefoged 1992): once one leaves the realm of emotional hand twisting by overly sentimental scholars, the question is much more debatable than appears at first sight. However, I think that professional linguists *can* agree that the disappearance of a language without documentation is a huge scientific loss. Our linguistic scientific enterprise depends on the multiplicity of languages and the knowledge of linguistic diversity. It is only through knowledge of diverse languages with different structures and belonging to different language families that we can truly begin to gain an understanding of universal grammar, i.e., the nature of the human language capacity. Similarly, our understanding of linguistic typology and our ability to accurately classify languages and reconstruct proto-forms depends on the availability of a wide array of languages.

If one believes this, if one takes the position that no language should be allowed to become extinct without having been scientifically preserved, then one has to acknowledge that the task is urgent. Speakers of endangered languages are not only dying away — the most obvious and final loss — but they are also forgetting their languages and losing command of the richness that defined that language as opposed to the one down the road. As Dixon (1997:147n) correctly points out, 'A sad lesson that has been learnt from the study of language-death situations is that a community does not realize its language is threatened until it is too late to do anything to remedy the situation.'

Dixon's view about what needs to be done is stated in unequivocal terms (p. 144): 'The most important task in linguistics today — indeed, the only really important task — is to get out in the field and describe languages, while this still can

be done. Self-admiration in the looking glass of formalist theory can wait; that will always be possible. Linguistic description must be undertaken now.'

Even if one puts some of the hyperbole aside, the truth is that the problem is real and we linguists are doing very little about it, apart from discussing the matter among ourselves so as to assuage our guilt. This is clearly a case where we cannot shift the blame to someone else: the failure to tackle the endangered languages crisis is not due to some budget dean nor to some philistine of a congressman nor to a CEO of some big corporation. The fault lies with us linguists, the people who should be up in arms about the problem. In essence, to quote Pogo, 'We has seen the enemy, and it is us.'

What I would like to do now is discuss three areas in which we as linguists exacerbate rather than solve the problem. The discussions fall under three headings: First, we linguists don't care; second, we linguists care too much; and third, our non-western colleagues don't care and would be unprepared to help out even if they did.

2.0 We linguists don't care

2.1 Theory

One hates to make blanket generalizations about a discipline as varied and with so many subfields as linguistics. Nevertheless, it is probably fair to say that in terms of overall world view and intellectual orientation, linguistics as a field is fundamentally theory driven as opposed to data driven. There was a time when linguistics was inextricably tied up with the study of non-written, non-western languages; but this is not the case today. General linguists aren't opposed to the study of these languages; it's just that it isn't important to them. What is viewed as important is trying to characterize the species-shared human language capability, i.e., linguistics has branched off from its anthropological and philological roots and has essentially become a branch of cognitive psychology. The lack of concern about the endangered languages problem is an extension of the general lack of interest in descriptive empirical research, whatever the language might be. This lack of interest is reflected in the structure of graduate linguistics curricula (and particularly the marginal position of field methods classes, see Newman 1992), the content of linguistics courses at the introductory as well as advanced levels, and in professional hiring practices. Someone might legitimately ask whether there is any objective evidence to document my claim that the empirical study of 'exotic' languages occupies a marginal position in linguistics. To check this out, I decided to look at Ph.D. dissertations, since what students work on is probably a reasonable reflection of the current ethos in a field and the interests of their teachers. I went through the linguistics section of *Dissertation Abstracts International* beginning in January 1997 and running through June, 1998, i.e., 18 months' worth of entries. Based primarily on the titles, with a quick glance at the abstracts themselves, I classified the dissertations into a number of crude categories, such as English/theoretical, sociolinguistics, ESL, Romance, African, Native American, etc. Granted that my methodology was a bit haphazard and unsystematic, the results were nevertheless instructive. In the year and a half, there were a total of 485 dissertations. Of these,

280 were concerned with English or general linguistic matters; 97 were on European languages, 83 of which were on the big three, namely, Romance, Slavic, Germanic; 78 were on Asian languages, of which 69 were also limited to three groups, namely, Chinese, Japanese, Korean. These three macro categories account for 455 of the dissertations, i.e., 94% of the total. The other 30 dissertations, i.e., the remaining 6%, were on languages of Austronesia (3), Australia (2), Native America (13) and Africa (12). But not all of these 30 represent fieldwork on small 'exotic' languages, since (a) they included studies of major national languages such as Quechua, Hausa, Swahili, and Sango, and (b) it was not always possible to determine from the abstract whether fieldwork was involved or whether it was a theoretical study drawing on secondary materials.

2.2 The culture of linguists (as opposed to anthropologists)

When linguistics was a part of anthropology, as it was for Boas, Sapir, Voegelin, Lounsbury, et al., fieldwork was a natural component of work in the discipline. Anthropology graduate students have traditionally been expected to go into the field; a student who wanted to do an 'arm-chair' dissertation was viewed as a professional misfit. Crediting Kroeber, Geertz (1984:265) speaks of the 'centrifugal impulse of anthropology—distant places, distant times, distant species ... distant grammars.' Clearly there are problems with basing scholarly pursuits on the appeal of the 'exotic' (consider, for example, the concerns expressed by Said 1978), but what is striking about linguistics nowadays, as opposed to anthropology, is its total separation from fieldwork. My personal experience with linguistics graduate students is that they display a singular lack of venturesomeness. Students aren't attracted by the idea of fieldwork for the simple reason that they don't want to go to the field. I suspect that if I had funding to send a dozen graduate students to remote places to do work on dying languages, I would have trouble giving the money away. The students whom I have met would much rather stay in the comfort of a safe place such as Bloomington or Champaign-Urbana or Evanston working within the comfortable confines of the latest (and thus non-risky) linguistic theory. Dixon's charge for linguistics to get out in the field will fall on deaf ears because it runs counter to the prevailing culture and personality of the people who now make up the discipline of linguistics.

3.0 We linguists care too much

When Emmon Bach, a well-known and distinguished linguist, was working on Wakashan, an endangered language of British Columbia, he was challenged by one of the elders as to why he and his community should care about the linguistic work being done. Bach's response was to formulate the following principle (Bach 1995): 'I will try to put at least half of my time and effort in working in a community into things that make sense for the community. What that work might be can range from things as simple as copying tapes for people who want them, through preparing texts, etc., in ways that are accessible, to helping out with language programs etc.' This quotation has been repeated with approbation (and without challenge) by various linguists since, e.g., by a speaker at a fieldwork and ethics symposium held at the 1998 meeting of the Linguistic Society of America and by the

author of a chapter submitted to a volume in preparation on linguistic fieldwork (Newman & Ratliff forthcoming).

Whereas fieldwork does entail real ethical and professional responsibilities to the people whom one is studying (see Greaves 1994; Newman 1992), I am troubled by the notion that we should spend half our time doing what I would call linguistic social work. I know that this is an unfashionable position in the late 1990s, but I would argue that there *is* a value in pure fundamental research and that as scientists we have to resist the ever-present pressure to justify our work on grounds of immediate social relevance. The justification for doing research on an endangered language has to be the scientific value of providing that documentation and in preserving aspects of that language and culture for posterity. The purpose cannot be to make the few remaining speakers feel good.

Having said this — and in principle, I do believe strongly in the correctness of this viewpoint — the reality is that it is impossible to escape the practical and emotional pressures to behave like a caring human being in the field, nor would one want to (see Grinewald 1998:157). In many cases, languages are dying because communities are dying, and they are dying because they are poor and have been neglected, if not directly exploited. The linguist who is welcomed into such a situation will either fail to establish rapport, in which case the research will be a failure, or will establish rapport, in which case he/she will increasingly acquire social and professional responsibilities that will compete for research time. The result is that the good-hearted, well-meaning linguist, for whom we can all extend our admiration, will do less of a job of basic documentation than one would have hoped for.

One might argue that in the case of endangered languages, the intertwining of language preservation as a social goal and language documentation as a scientific goal is, if not beneficial, at least harmless. I think otherwise.

To begin with, language preservation projects drain resources from the important linguistic task of primary documentation, both in terms of personnel and in terms of funding. A case in point is the American Indian Studies Research Institute at Indiana University. For the past half a dozen years or so, the Institute's directors (Ray Demallie and Douglas Parks) and various research associates and research assistants have been doing intensive work on six native American languages, two of which, Lakota and Dakota, are holding their own, four of which, Nakoda (= Assiniboine), Pawnee, (South Bend) Skirii, and Arikara are down to the last few speakers. One should be pleased that such an active research unit exists. However, one needs to point out that a major portion of the Institute's work, work that has received generous funding, has been devoted to the preparation of language teaching materials in Arikara and Nakoda for use in the schools. If one looks at the Arikara materials, for example, one cannot help but be impressed. They are masterfully done with beautiful typography and graphics, and with interactive recordings, etc. Given the quality of the work, which had to have been labor intensive, one can easily appreciate that over half the time and half the money of the Institute has been devoted to the preparation these materials. But what are these materials?

Mostly they are language lessons intended to be used in culture enrichment classes for Arikara students who no longer speak the language and who are not about to revive it. So, although the mood at the Institute is uplifting (and when people from the project go to the Arikara reservation in North Dakota, they are appreciated for the work that they are doing) the fact is that the time and energy of highly skilled and deeply committed field linguists are being dissipated. Resources that could have been used for the basic linguistic description of a goodly number of endangered languages have been devoted to what are in reality ethnic awareness/cultural heritage projects.

The above remarks are not intended to be critical of my colleagues at Indiana. In fact, they are also seriously involved in the preparation of dictionaries and text collection of the kind that we so desperately need for endangered languages. The point that I want to make, and which I feel is valid, is that language preservation/revival as a socially relevant issue has more 'sex appeal' than pure linguistics and thus is bound to seduce well-meaning scholars, especially when the appeal is accompanied by money. Just recently, for example, the Administration for Native Americans announced the availability of substantial grants (up to \$125,000 per year for three years) in support of projects that will 'promote the survival and continuing vitality of Native American languages' and will encourage the 'establishment and support of community Native American language projects to bring older and younger Native Americans together to facilitate and encourage the transfer of Native American language skills from one generation to another...' (e-mail distribution from SMARTS grantline, fall, 1998). Given the paucity of funds from the National Science Foundation, etc., for basic research, one can understand why linguists would be thrilled to apply for such grants and, if successful, would gladly embark on the work. But, one can be sure that the Administration for Native Americans is not going to fund revival projects on essentially moribund languages spoken by the last 4 or 5 octogenarians—the money is more likely to go to support seemingly viable languages such as Navajo and Lakota. Moreover, even if funds were to be provided for work with truly endangered languages, such as Arikara, the applied nature of the projects would leave little room for pure research.

Once one leaves the realm of North America, there is also a troublesome question regarding the appropriateness of an activist policy regarding preservation and revitalization of minority languages. A westerner who gets permission to conduct basic linguistic research in Africa (or Asia or Latin America) is a guest in someone else's country who has been allowed to go there for specific scholarly purposes. Language policy in fragile multi-ethnic states is not a simple sociolinguistic matter; rather, it is a serious, highly contentious political matter with which a foreigner should not become embroiled. If as part of its educational and economic policy, a country such as Nigeria should choose to promote its big languages (e.g., Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo) at the expense of the small ones, the western linguist who takes a 'proactive' role in defense of the smaller, endangered languages is not only being presumptuous, but is also being personally reckless, thereby risking the continuation and success of the field research project, not to mention his/her own safety and welfare. As linguists, we can attempt to educate

and inform responsible persons in government, education, and business about the significance and value of linguistic diversity in their countries, but we have no right to intervene in domestic policy matters nor to undertake linguistic social work under the guise of scientific research.

4.0 Our non-western colleagues don't care and would be unprepared to help out even if they did

It is now 1998, but generally speaking we American (and European) linguists function in many ways just as if it were 1968 or 1948 or even 1928. That is to say, although languages are dying in Brazil and India and Nigeria and Indonesia, we operate as if both the problem and the solution were ours and not the Brazilians', the Indians', the Nigerians', or the Indonesians'. We're way off the mark.

Colette Grinevald (1998:151) has written: 'To accept the fact that South American linguistics should be carried out as much as possible by South Americans has in fact deep implications for the way we conduct our business and the way we basically conceive of our role as linguists.' One could argue whether this necessarily 'should' be the case, but for very real practical matters, this has to be the case, and part of our inability to address the endangered languages problem in any meaningful way is due to the failure to recognize this point. Even if we — by which I mean we Americans and western Europeans — had the will to carry out the needed empirical research on endangered languages around the world, there is no way that we could do it because of political and economic impediments. Most scholars are too well aware of the political and social realities of working in the developing world, namely the persistent hostility to foreign researchers. In many countries, it is a major hassle to get a visa, not to mention official permission to conduct research, and even if these are forthcoming, there are problems in getting in-country cooperation and support. A more serious problem, however, is research funding: it just costs too much money for an American scholar to go abroad to carry out field research. One might be lucky in getting funds for one person to work one year on one endangered language, but who is going to attend to the other 10 or 20 or 30 languages? The only way endangered languages in Africa, for example, are going to get described is if African linguists and their African students do the work. Otherwise it can't get done.

In some sense linguistics in the African area, to which I will limit myself for purposes of the discussion, is already falling into the hands of Africans. Anyone who now attends the Annual Conference on African Linguistics (soon to celebrate its 30th anniversary) cannot help but be struck by the shift in the balance of the participants as opposed to twenty or so years ago. At that time, most of the participants were white (and white males at that); nowadays Africans (some established scholars, some Ph.D. students) generally constitute at least half of the people present.

Further evidence of the importance of Africans in African linguistic research can be gathered by looking at recent Ph.D. dissertations. A count of dissertations on African languages (excluding Arabic) listed in the African Studies Association *Newsletter* from 1990 to the present (which includes theses from Canada and the

United Kingdom as well as the U.S.) gives a total of 95 theses. Of these, 55 were by Africans and only 40 by non-Africans.

At first sight, these figures might be heartening. However, there is a fact of real importance for the endangered languages question that does not come out of the raw numbers. When one looks at the topics and languages treated by the Africans, it turns out that, as best as one can surmise from peoples' names, almost all of the theses are descriptions of the writer's own language. In effect, having said that the study of endangered languages in Africa has to be done by Africans, we find that these people are no more qualified and ready to undertake the task than the most abstract, theoretical MIT linguist. What went wrong? I would suggest that we western linguists have unwittingly distorted the intellectual development and orientation of non-western linguists studying in the U.S. (and Europe) so as to exclude them from any involvement in the endangered languages issue.

For an African to write on his own language, e.g., an Igbo speaker to write on Igbo, is essentially the same as an English speaker writing on English. Those of us who consider ourselves descriptive field linguists and who have little patience with the English speaker who does the umpteenth study of reflexives or what have you in English — obviously in light of the latest theory — have failed to recognize that what characterizes our work is the excitement of discovery with regard to a language that is outside of ourselves, and that the Igbo person who writes on Igbo is not partaking of the same enterprise. Those of us who are quick to say, 'Who needs another study of English?' or 'Why can't that person go to the field and do something of real value such as describing a poorly known language?' do not pass judgment on our African students for what they are doing. We forget that whereas Hausa may be exotic for me, it is not for the Hausa speaker. And by allowing the African students to work exclusively on their own languages, we fail to communicate the importance (and excitement) of fieldwork, which is essential if the person is ever going to do basic research when he/she returns home. In effect, we never encourage or cajole our African students who speak major languages, such as Hausa or Yoruba or Swahili or Lingala or Oromo, to accept the view that what they *must* do when they finish their degrees and return home is undertake the study of minority languages and, moreover, that they must pressure their own students in their home universities to do the same. For a variety of reasons, the students going to universities and studying linguistics (whether in their own countries or abroad) are rarely members of these minority communities themselves; it is members of dominant groups who have these opportunities. As members of our discipline, with all the rights and interests and responsibilities thereof, they should have been brought into the endangered languages fold. Unfortunately, in the absence of visionary scholars who fervently believe that language loss is indeed a culturally and intellectually catastrophic matter, language centers in Africa (and Asia and Latin America) will continue to devote their energies to the promotion and development of large national and regional languages, with scant attention to the languages speeding towards extinction.

Apart from the matter of attitude is the fact that we here in America do not properly train our African students in fieldwork procedures. Since most of our Af-

rican Ph.D. students are writing on their own languages, generally using themselves as informants, we usually fail to give them training in empirical scientific methodology. They are not given solid training in phonetic transcription, witness the fact that those who do not speak a tone language — and even some who do — are seldom trained in hearing and transcribing tone. They are not taught how to manage a corpus (since they are basing their theses on personal introspection) nor how to collect and preserve primary data. Nor are they taught how to collect and transcribe texts and what to do with them once they have them. In short, even if we could convince our African colleagues of the seriousness of the endangered languages question, the Ph.D. education that we have provided them, with its heavy dose of modern theory and elegant formalism, has not equipped them to undertake the task.

5.0 Conclusion

In sum, I am afraid that I have to close on a somber note. Those of us who are concerned about the endangered languages question and would like to see something constructive done about it are up against a formidable enemy, and that enemy is the discipline of linguistics and the individuals who make it up. We can continue to talk about the matter — as surely will be done again and again at meeting after meeting — but given the odds against us, the chances of concrete results are pitifully small.

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Session II:

Crossing Borders & Traditional Links: Exploring Fresh Links with Other Disciplines

Friday, 30 October 1999

1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Chair: Jerry Morgan

Saturday, 31 October 1999

9:00 a.m. - 11:45 a.m.

Chair: Braj Kachru

