Endangered languages

This edited volume provides an overview of the issues surrounding language loss. It brings together work by theoretical linguists, field linguists, and non-linguist members of minority communities to provide an integrated view of how language is lost, from sociological and economic as well as from linguistic perspectives.

The contributions to the volume fall into four categories. The chapters by Dorian, and Grenoble and Whaley provide an overview of language endangerment. Grinevald, England, Jacobs, and Nora and Richard Dauenhauer describe the situation confronting threatened languages from both a linguistic and sociological perspective. The understudied issue of what (beyond a linguistic system) can be lost as a language ceases to be spoken is addressed by Mithun, Hale, Jocks, and Woodbury. In the last section, Kapanga, Myers-Scotton, and Vakhtin consider the linguistic processes which underlie language attrition.

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Language loss and community response

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Preface

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The imminent dawning of the next millennium offers an obvious, if somewhat arbitrary, inducement to evaluate the situation in which the world finds itself. There can be little doubt that a chief characteristic of our current state is extreme dynamism, perhaps most evident in the constant shifting of technology and material culture, but also plainly observable in everything from ecosystems to moral attitudes. In that small niche of the world which falls under the purview of linguists – language and language use – the globe as it now exists is also being transformed at an incredible rate. One particularly striking feature of this transformation is the number of languages which will simply cease to be spoken in the next fifty to a hundred years. The phenomenon of language death, and how various communities have responded and are responding to it, forms the theme of this volume.

It is generally agreed that there are somewhere between 5,000 and 6,000 languages spoken in the world today. These languages are unevenly distributed over the earth and over the world's population: while some countries, like Papua New Guinea, show extremely high language density (approximately 860 languages spoken in a territory of only 461,690 sq. km), other large areas may be characterized by relative scarcity. For example, there are but nine languages found in Saudia Arabia, six of which are varieties of Arabic, even though the country is over four times the size of Papua New Guinea.[1]

Just as the languages of the world are distributed unequally in terms of geography, they vary widely in terms of the numbers of people who use them. Manifold languages are spoken by a thousand people or less, with the extreme cases being those which are no longer in primary use within any community and only remain part of the personal knowledge of a handful of individuals. In contrast, some languages are employed as the first language

1 Data on the number of languages spoken in Papua New Guinea and Saudi Arabia were taken from Grimes 1992.

of tens of millions of speakers. Mandarin Chinese, with well over 700 million speakers, easily tops the list.

Over the course of the next century, however, the very basic global picture painted here will change drastically. A certain small group of languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, and Spanish, to name a few) will be used by an ever increasing percentage of the world's population, while a great many other languages will completely disappear. Just how many will disappear is a matter open to debate, though according to the more dire predictions of Michael Krauss, over 4,000 of the world's languages will cease to be spoken by the end of the next century (Krauss 1992).

For obvious reasons, then, endangered languages are a topic which has become of particularly great concern to linguists. As a result, work on language endangerment and death has been accelerated over the past decade. Representative scholarship can be found in Brenzinger (1992), Dorian (1989), Fase, Jaspaert, and Kroon (1992), Hinton (1994), and Robins and Uhlenbeck (1991).

As this work on language endangerment has progressed, a number of key points of inquiry have emerged. (In this volume, the chapters by Dorian, and Grenoble and Whaley address subsets of these points in more detail than we do here.) At the most basic level of investigation, we find a need to gain more accurate assessments of current language vitality. While it is widely accepted that a large proportion of the world's languages are nearing extinction, it is difficult to form anything but an educated guess about the breadth of the problem. This stems in no small part from the mundane fact that empirical data on language use is lacking for many parts of the world.

In order to be useful for research on language loss, language assessments need to include not only head counts of speakers and estimates of fluency in native languages, but also evaluations of the likelihood of the continuation, decline or revitalization of the language(s) in any given community. Only with detailed and comprehensive data on language vitality is long-term prediction of the global linguistic picture a real possibility.

Until relatively recently, only the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) collected information of this kind on a large-scale basis.[2] The size of

2 The information is available in *Ethnologue: languages of the world* (Grimes, 1992). This resource is constantly being updated and is now accessible on the internet (http://www@sil.org/ethnologue).

SIL, with its force of linguists and missionaries placed into new linguistic communities all the time, leaves it the single most efficient institutional mechanism for gathering demographic information on people groups and their language use. However, there are other large-scale projects currently underway which can supplement SIL's efforts. For example, a UNESCO sponsored program called the International Clearing House for Endangered Languages was initiated in 1995 at the University of Tokyo. Their manifesto is to accumulate information on as many threatened languages as possible and to disseminate the data to interested parties. Of course, there are also many regionally focused institutions around the world which are involved in gathering crucial information on endangered languages within specific locales. (Colette Grinevald identifies several such institutions in South America in her contribution to this volume.)

Inseparably linked to questions about current language vitality is the crucial issue of identifying precisely the kinds of situations which will facilitate or, alternatively, hinder language loss/expansion. Certain factors are well known. For instance, large numbers of speakers or governmental support for a language tend to ensure its spread, while conversely, small numbers of speakers and active repression of a language tend to lead to its loss. However, these factors comprise only two of the most obvious influences on the vitality of a language.

A much subtler, yet move pervasive, predictor of the continued use of a language is the prestige attached to it. The prestige may derive from a number of factors (including the facts just noted – government support and large numbers of speakers); *inter alia*, a language typically grows in prestige if it is associated with a rich literary tradition, is used in local or national media of communication, is utilized in processes of commercial exchange (and thus is associated with economic advancement), or if it is tied to a widely practiced religion. Though any of these variables may prove to be important in imparting prestige to a language, there is no direct causal link. That is to say, a language could be marked by some of the properties listed above, yet still fail to achieve a high enough degree of prestige to ensure its continued use.

A case in point is Irish Gaelic (see Watson 1989 for details). Around AD 1500, Irish Gaelic was in primary use through nearly all of Ireland. Today, however, native speakers are found only in scattered communities in the north and west of the country. According to the 1971 census, only

about a quarter of the population claims to speak Gaelic, and the proportion which actually employs Gaelic on any sort of regular basis is but a fraction of this number. Such a decline in Gaelic has occurred despite the fact that it had a large number of speakers and the fact that the language was traditionally utilized in education, commerce, government, religion, etc. The social conditions were just right to establish Gaelic as a high-prestige language, and indeed, it did. Nonetheless, the prestige attached to the language was not enough to maintain the language against the rapid encroachment of English. Why should this be? Why did Irish Gaelic not repel English altogether, or at least contain the spread of English so that both languages came to exist in equilibrium?

Nancy C. Dorian, in her chapter for this volume entitled "Western language ideologies and small-language prospects," argues that such patterns of language loss in Europe and the Americas are understandable only when one recognizes the force of a language "ideology" to undermine the normal maintenance effects of prestige. This ideology, which forms part of the heritage brought to the New World by conquering Europeans crucially carries a bias towards monolingualism. Such a bias highly disfavors situations where a native language exists peacefully with the Indo-European language of colonization. What makes this proposal particularly intriguing is that it underscores the dynamic nature of a social attitude like language prestige. While linguists have made strides toward comprehending what components go into building prestige, they have often ignored the forces which can dismantle, or at least reduce, that prestige. By identifying one such force, Dorian highlights a seriously neglected area of research.

Of course, language prestige is just one among an array of issues which must be addressed in understanding the processes of language maintenance or loss. So complex is the interplay of factors that it may ultimately prove impossible to predict the fate of individual languages over long periods of time. Even so, enough scholarship has been put forth for models which assess the liklihood of language loss with some accuracy to be conceivable. Lenore A. Grenoble and Lindsay J. Whaley outline certain necessary features of such a model in their contribution to the volume, "Toward a typology of language endangerment." Taking as their starting point a proposal laid out in Edwards (1992), they discuss certain vital components of a theoretical model of endangerment situations. For example, they argue that the pressures that combine to enervate or bolster language vitality

should be arranged into several parallel levels based upon the source of the pressure, i.e. whether they are internal to the speech community, whether they are external but form part of the immediate context in which the community is found, whether they are a general characteristic of the geographic area where the community is found, etc. A desirable consequence of this architecture is that it accounts for pressures at different levels which run counter to each other.

While the attempt to understand and predict language loss has been a predominant concern of scholarly literature on endangered languages, there are two equally pressing considerations: what happens in a speech community when its traditional language is replaced by another? And what are the possible responses to the threat of language loss? The most fruitful answers to these questions are typically drawn from the experiences of communities which are confronting them first hand. Three of the chapters found in this collection offer insights on the effects of language loss on speakers of Native American languages and the challenges confronting them in the development of language maintenance/restoration programs.

Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, in "Technical, emotional, and ideological issues in reversing language shift: examples from Southeast Alaska," supply a retrospective view of attempts at language restoration in Alaska. In general, the programs aimed at reversing the precipitous decline in Native-language use have failed in Alaska. Born out of their experience with a number of such programs, the Dauenhauers detail several essential lessons about instigating language-maintenance programs. Chief among them is that a community must properly grasp and address the full range of attitudes it carries about itself and its relationship to other groups before a successful attempt at language restoration is even conceivable. Part and parcel of this is the fact that the community, or a significant part of it, must be committed to the success of a language program before it is initiated. As they aptly point out, "Language reversal can't be done to you or for you by others."

The external situation described by Nora C. England ("Mayan efforts toward language preservation") appears to be quite different than that in Alaska. Mayan languages typically have several hundreds of thousands of speakers, and a majority of Mayas speak a Mayan language as a first language. The driving concern of Mayan communities is not to revitalize their

language but to buttress it against the increasingly rapid spread of Spanish. One might say that whereas Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer discuss the efforts of people who find themselves at the end of a process of language shift, England reviews the efforts of those at the beginning.

Despite the difference in language vitality, England also identifies community involvement as the single most important property for determining the likelihood of success of language programs. Though Mayan efforts at language maintenance include lobbying for the official status of Mayan languages in the regions where they are spoken, the lion's share of their work has gone into forming a self-generated, self-directed Academy to control decisions about Mayan language policies and to promote language use among Mayas. Even with the institutionalization of community support for language maintenance, England cites three forbidding obstacles: the lack of resources, the lack of technical expertise to guide decisions about language policies, and internal disagreement about the best course of action in language promotion. The last obstacle in particular serves as a crucial reminder that language use can be a highly political issue.

The theme of active community involvement again plays a key role in the contribution by Annette Jacobs "A chronology of Mohawk language instruction at Kahnawà:ke." The Mohawk immersion school in Kahnawà:ke was not introduced suddenly, but emerged piecemeal over a number of years as resources and opportunities became available. Nevertheless, the school, which represents one of the more successful language-revitalization efforts in North America, could never have developed if it were not for the sustained vision of certain community members.

Linguists also comprise a community which is directly affected by language loss, but in their case the death of a language usually bears professional rather than personal consequences. For this reason, their precise role in language preservation is unclear. Do linguists simply record languages while they are still in use, or should linguists take a more active role to promote language revitalization? Such questions have only recently been addressed in a public way by linguists, and as one might expect, there is no clear consensus. Some argue, along with K. Hale (1992), that a necessary goal of linguists is "safeguarding diversity in the world of people." Alternatively, some (such as Ladefoged 1992), argue for a professional detachment from the issue. Under this view, linguists are acting most responsibly when they leave the preservation of languages to the communities which

use them and the political authorities that are charged with overseeing language policies. This, of course, does not preclude linguists acting in the role of professional experts when called upon.

Colette Grinevald, in "Language endangerment in South America: a programmatic approach," offers several insights into this issue from the perspective of a linguist who has been intimately involved with attempts at language preservation in Latin America and South America. She articulates a position which has the linguistic community, in its entirety, actively engaged in the issue of endangered languages while respecting and promoting the authority of speech communities to direct the fate of traditional languages. On the one hand, she asserts that decisions about language maintenance or restoration must be left solely in the hands of speakers of threatened languages. To this end, the linguistic community should also recognize the importance of providing technical training, and not just technical advice, to the speech communities they work with. On the other hand, the linguistic profession must make certain systemic changes to assist in the cause of maintaining linguistic diversity. Among other things, she calls for an increased willingness on the part of top graduate programs to train foreign linguists, an improvement in the training of fieldworkers, and giving due weight to fieldwork on endangered languages which, in tenure and hiring decisions, is oft times assessed as being largely in the realm of "descriptive" and "applied" linguistics.

Because the rapid loss of languages (and concomitant changes occurring in cultures) promises to reweave the social fabric of the world completely in the coming century, one might expect it to be a topic of keen interest for anyone concerned with the nature of social interaction in the not so distant future. On the contrary, attention to the issues surrounding endangered languages has remained mostly restricted to certain segments of academia and to individual communities currently faced with the real possibility of the loss of a traditional language. The general inattention to the issue of language death stems in part from a failure by linguists to adequately explore and to explain questions about what, if anything, is lost when one language becomes obsolescent and is superceded by another.

One popularly held opinion is that very little beyond an arcane linguistic system disappears with the death of a language. While this loss may be regrettable for those who have an emotional attachment to the language, so the wisdom proceeds, it really is of little concern to humanity

generally. Indeed, many might argue that the leveling of linguistic diversity is a good thing in that it facilitates communication and, accordingly, intercultural harmony. Besides the fact that recent history (with the interethnic strife between the Serbian-speaking peoples of Bosnia, or the Kinyarwanda-speaking peoples of Rwanda and Burundi) provides too many counterexamples for this misconception to be tenable, there is much reason to assume that language diversity is "good" and should be preserved. A number of chapters in this book provide arguments to this effect.

Marianne Mithun ("The significance of diversity in language endangerment and preservation") points out that language offers one of the most direct glimpses at the creativity of the human mind. As a demonstration of this fact, she contrasts several aspects of the grammar of English and Central Pomo, a language of California now spoken by fewer than ten individuals. The contrast, which is presented in non-technical language, drives home just how different languages can be. Thus, in the death of any language comes the irreplaceable loss of a picture of human creativity.

Using a very different approach, Ken Hale ("On endangered languages and the importance of linguistic diversity") presents further arguments that a decline in language diversity constitutes a huge intellectual loss for humanity. He begins by providing several examples in which data from a single language has confirmed, altered, or vexed theoretically based beliefs about the way language operates. Hale continues by outlining some truly exceptional properties of a now extinct language called Damin, which was created by the Lardil people of Australia. His purpose in doing so is to demonstrate that instances of intellectual genius are often contained in languages. When languages disappear, we are in less of a position to recognize the full breadth of human cognitive capacity, let alone to account for it.

Christopher Jocks ("Living words and cartoon translations: Longhouse 'texts' and the limitations of English") and Anthony C. Woodbury ("Documenting rhetorical, aesthetic, and expressive loss in language shift") both explore the necessary connection between certain types of cultural practices and language. These two case studies are significant in that they offer actual instances of the widely held view that language loss entails cultural loss. Jocks addresses the role of the Mohawk language in understanding Mohawk culture and, in particular, religion. He speaks from a personal perspective, as a native Mohawk who acquired his ethnic tongue

only as a second language, and has gone on to specialize in Mohawk religion. He shows that in a culture with a long-standing oral tradition (such as Mohawk), knowledge, memory, language and culture are indivisible. Moreover, language and cultural identity, and language and self-identity, are inexorably linked.

In a similar vein, Woodbury examines a set of suffixes in Cup'ik, a dialect of Central Alaskan Yup'ik Eskimo. These suffixes subtly nuance the nouns to which they are attached such that they are used with great rhetorical effect in Cup'ik speech. Woodbury has found that as Cup'ik is supplanted by English, the affective suffixes are not replaced by any functionally equivalent strategy. Indeed, Woodbury argues they *could not* be replaced. Therefore, the aesthetic and rhetorical value of these suffixes for Cup'ik culture disappears with the language.

A final topic of inquiry which has risen to the forefront of research on endangered languages is the structural changes which occur in a language as it is replaced by another. For the sake of simplicity, discussions on endangered languages are often framed as though speakers suddenly switch from the use of one language to another. The reality, though, is that language shift takes place over the course of a generation or more and can only occur in a context of multilingualism. This being the case, questions arise as to the morphosyntactic modifications to a language which is in declining use. How are they effected? Do they follow any sort of predictable patterns? Are the patterns universal or based on idiosyncracies of individual languages? The answers to such questions not only further general linguistic theory, but also promise to provide insights into the functioning of the human mind.

In this volume, André Kapanga ("Impact of language variation and accommodation theory on language maintenance: an analysis of Shaba Swahili") analyzes three subdialects of Swahili spoken in Shaba, Zaire. He examines several aspects of the phonology, morphology, and lexicon of these subdialects and finds, surprisingly, that the least prestigious subdialect of Shaba Swahili has remained most vital, while the most prestigious has been most affected by French. This leads Kapanga to suggest a set of social factors which might account for this unexpected result.

Whereas Kapanga uses data on language structure to assess language vitality, Carol Myers-Scotton in "A way to dusty death: the Matrix Language turnover hypothesis" uses her Matrix Language Frame model

to account for the ways in which language structure is transformed as one language is replaced by another. Her claim is that when two or more languages coexist, one is often the dominant, or Matrix, language. The grammar of this language impinges on the others such that speakers will begin using certain structural components of the Matrix Language (e.g. constituent order and inflectional morphology) even when constructing sentences in a less dominant language. One of the significant points in this chapter is that instances of language shift do not involve one static language system abruptly taking a place of another. Instead, it is a gradual process that includes a transitional state in which the two languages are blended in the speech of individual members of the community.

Nikolai Vakhtin makes the same point but pushes it a step further in "Copper Island Aleut: a case of language 'resurrection'." He argues that language-endangerment situations cannot always be depicted as one language replacing another. There is another possibility – a traditional language can be displaced by new "mixed" or "creolized" tongue. In other words, the gradual shift from one matrix language to another can be arrested before the shift is completed. To make his case, he cites the situation of Copper Island Aleut (or CIA), which takes its lexical base from Aleut and morphology from Russian.

By necessity, we have only hinted here at the full gamut of issues involved in language loss and the responses of communities to such loss. This overview should, however, provide a context for discerning the direction which research into these matters is currently travelling. It should be noted that many of the chapters in this volume were originally presented at a conference on language endangerment held at Dartmouth College in February, 1995 (a summary of the major themes of the conference appears in Grenoble and Whaley 1996). The conference was made possible by contributions from the Steffens Twenty-First Century Fund, the Dickey Center for International Understanding, the Nelson A. Rockefeller Foundation, the New Hampshire Humanities Council, and the Office of the Dean of the Faculty of Dartmouth College. None of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed. We would like to thank them for their generous support. We would also like to thank Brigg Noyes for help in transcription, and especially Kirsten Henschel for work in final editing and proofreading.

Abbreviations and symbols

A	adjective
ACC/acc	accusative
caus	causative
CAY	Central Alaskan Yup'ik Eskimo
CIA	Copper Island Aleut
cl	class
cont	continuous
cop	copula
CP	projection of Complementizer
CS	codeswitching
DET/det	determiner
EAS	East African Swahili
EL	Embedded Language
ERG	ergative
FSU	former Soviet Union
FUT/fut	future
fv	final vowel
GEN/gen	genitive
imp	imperative
imperf	imperfect(ive)
indic	indicative
INF/inf	infinitive
loc	locative
ML	Matrix Language
MLF	Matrix Language Frame
N	noun
n	neuter
neg	negation
nom	nominative
NP	noun phrase
NSL	Native language as a second language
obj	object
OBV	obviative
part	particle
PERF/perf	perfect(ive)
pl	plural
poss	possessive
PRES/pres	present
prog	progressive
PROX	proximative
rel	relative
RMD	Romani mixed dialects
sg	singular
Sh.S.	Shaba Swahili
SIL	Summer Institute of Linguistics
semlf	semelfactive
SV	stem vowel
SVO etc.	subject–verb–object etc.
T	tense
T/A	tense/aspect
TP	tense phrase
V	verb
=	clitic marker
#	morpheme-boundary marker