
Another View of Endangered Languages

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DISCUSSION NOTE

Another view of endangered languages

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Language seldom publishes opinion pieces, such as that of Hale, Krauss, Watahomigie, Yamamoto, Craig, Jeanne, & England 1992 on endangered languages. I have nothing but praise for the work that these linguists do. But language preservation and maintenance is a multifaceted topic on which different opinions are possible. The views expressed in these papers are contrary to those held by many responsible linguists, and would not be appropriate in some of the African countries in which I have worked in the last few years. Tanzania, for example, is a country which is striving for unity, and the spreading of Swahili is regarded as a major force in this endeavor. Tribalism is seen as a threat to the development of the nation, and it would not be acting responsibly to do anything which might seem, at least superficially, to aid in its preservation.

Hale et al. (1992) write from the perspective of linguists who have worked in particular cultures; but the attitudes of the speakers of the languages that they describe are far from universal. As they indicate, in many communities the language is regarded as sacred—literally God-given. Linguists working in such communities should obviously respect the opinions of the speakers, and honor their wishes. The speakers are giving access to something that is sacred to them, and it should be treasured accordingly. But not everyone holds this view. The half a dozen speakers of Angami (Tibeto-Burman) with whom I worked earlier this year had a different attitude. They regarded it as an intellectually valid pursuit for me to take an interest in their language. Admittedly, they were all high school or college educated students who had a similar intellectual interest in my language. They might therefore be regarded as part of an elite, with views that were only those of the elite. But I do not think this is so. The profane, as opposed to sacred, view of language is widely shared, even among those who are certainly not part of the socio-economically elite. Many of the people with whom I have worked in undeveloped parts of India and Africa regard being a language consultant as just another job, and a reasonably high status one at that. They have no problem with satisfying my intellectual curiosity. They in no way regard their work as prostituting something that is holy. Instead they are pleased with the honored status of being teachers. Furthermore, it pays better than alternative occupations, such as picking tea or digging yams, and it is much less hard work.

Even among those for whom language is a vital part of the sacred way of life, the attitude towards linguists is not always that outlined in Hale et al. 1992. The Toda, speakers of a Dravidian language in the Nilgiri Hills of Southern India, have a series of songs which are an important part of their religious life (Emeneau 1984). They eagerly welcome linguists who wish to assist them in

recording their language. They also realize that with less than 1,000 speakers they are unlikely to remain a distinct entity. Many of the younger people want to honor their ancestors, but also to be part of a modern India. They have accepted that, in their view, the cost of doing this is giving up the use of their language in their daily life. Surely, this is a view to which they are entitled, and it would not be the action of a responsible linguist to persuade them to do otherwise. In the circumstances of my fieldwork it would also have been somewhat hypocritical. I was working with an Indian colleague who has decided to forego the use of his and his wife's native language in their own home, so that their child could be brought up as a native language speaker of English. This choice, and any choices that the Toda might make, are clearly their prerogatives.

So now let me challenge directly the assumption of these papers that different languages, and even different cultures, always ought to be preserved. It is paternalistic of linguists to assume that they know what is best for the community. One can be a responsible linguist and yet regard the loss of a particular language, or even a whole group of languages, as far from a 'catastrophic destruction' (Hale et al. 1992:7). Statements such as 'just as the extinction of any animal species diminishes our world, so does the extinction of any language' (Hale et al. 1992:8) are appeals to our emotions, not to our reason. The case for studying endangered languages is very strong on linguistic grounds. It is often enormously strong on humanitarian grounds as well. But it would be self-serving of linguists to pretend that this is always the case. We must be wary of arguments based on political considerations. Of course I am no more in favor of genocide or repression of minorities than I am of people dying of tuberculosis or starving through ignorance. We should always be sensitive to the concerns of the people whose language we are studying. But we should not assume that we know what is best for them.

We may also note that human societies are not like animal species. The world is remarkably resilient in the preservation of diversity; different cultures are always dying while new ones arise. They may not be based on ethnicity or language, but the differences remain. Societies will always produce subgroups as varied as computer nerds, valley girls, and drug pushers, who think and behave in different ways. In the popular view the world is becoming more homogeneous, but that may be because we are not seeing the new differences that are arising. Consider two groups of Bushmen, the Zhu|oãsi and the !Xóó, who speak mutually unintelligible languages belonging to different subgroups of the Khoisan family, but otherwise behave in very similar ways. Are these two groups more culturally diverse than Appalachian coalminers, Iowa farmers, and Beverly Hills lawyers? As a linguist, I am of course saddened by the vast amount of linguistic and cultural knowledge that is disappearing, and I am delighted that the National Science Foundation has sponsored our UCLA research, in which we try to record for posterity the phonetic structures of some of the languages that will not be around much longer. But it is not for me to assess the virtues of programs for language preservation versus those of com-

petitive programs for tuberculosis eradication, which may also need government funds.

In this changing world, the task of the linguist is to lay out the facts concerning a given linguistic situation. The approach that I would advocate is exemplified in our study of language use and teaching in Uganda (Ladefoged et al. 1971). With the full coöperation of the then (more or less) duly elected government (this was immediately before the time of Idi Amin), we assembled data on the linguistic situation. We tried to determine the linguistic similarities and mutual intelligibility of some of the major languages spoken in Uganda (about 16 Bantu, 5 Western Nilotic, 4 Eastern Nilotic, 2 Central Sudanic, and 4 non-Ugandan). We found that about 39% of the people could hold a conversation in Luganda (the largest single language), 35% in Swahili, and 21% in English. We noted that Radio Uganda put out programs in 16 Ugandan languages (some of them mutually intelligible), plus Swahili and English, and that there were literacy campaigns in 20 languages. Six Ugandan languages were used in schools. We summarized all our data so that the government could assess the linguistic situation. We did not try to determine the costs of making changes or of maintaining the *status quo*, in either monetary or human terms. It would have been presumptuous of us to weigh the loss of a language against the burdens facing Uganda. We tried to behave like responsible linguists with professional detachment.

Last summer I was working on Dahalo, a rapidly dying Cushitic language, spoken by a few hundred people in a rural district of Kenya. I asked one of our consultants whether his teen-aged sons spoke Dahalo. 'No,' he said. 'They can still hear it, but they cannot speak it. They speak only Swahili.' He was smiling when he said it, and did not seem to regret it. He was proud that his sons had been to school, and knew things that he did not. Who am I to say that he was wrong?

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