

Getting Language Rights, Shifting Linguistic Traditions*

Joseph Errington

Department of Anthropology, Yale University, New Haven, USA

ABSTRACT

»Endangerment,« »loss,« »death,« and related terms are increasingly familiar in descriptions of sociolinguistic changes now occurring at an unprecedented scale due to forces of globalization. They can serve both as names for shared concerns of linguists and anthropologists, and as descriptions of otherwise different scenes of social encounter, because they are subject to multiple uses and interpretations. This paper focuses on tacit, enabling assumptions of three distinct strategies for framing and redressing »threats« to marginalized languages and speech communities. Recognition of their ideological grounds helps develop a sharper sense of their different uses, and the different social saliences which linguistic descriptions can have in and for marginalized communities.

Key words: language rights, language endangerment, diversity, environment

Introduction

Global dynamics which endanger languages, cause them to die, and reduce the range of living linguistic diversity, are becoming an issue of growing concern for linguists who do not just study but also try to help to save them. I believe that this is leading to a renewal of old connections between those engaged in descriptions of language and culture, at least in the United States. I discuss this convergence here by considering broader perceptions and values of endangered lan-

guages for those who have different kinds of investments in their futures. This is a matter of critically considering different rhetorical framings of endangered languages and »language rights,« and the different purposes they can serve by invoking different senses of community, environment, and identity.

There is a clumsy play of words in my title which is supposed to signal that my primary concern is with practical conse-

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quences of these ideological differences, since work to procure (or get) rights to speak a language, requires that one already has a conception of, or get, the nature of the rights being sought. I will quickly review three broadly different ways of thinking about language endangerment and rights. The first, which emphasizes naturalness of fit between language, community, and environment, recycles Romanticist, organic conceptions of language and culture which Herder propounded in his *Essay on the Origin of Language*¹ and which powerfully shaped early social anthropology in Britain and the United States. Now they have new life in portrayals of languages as natural outgrowths of their environments. This has for instance become an important part of the self-description of the sociolinguistic activist group called Terralingua, which strongly recall the rhetoric of bio-ecological activist groups like the World Wildlife Fund. The WWF presents focal images of what ecologists call charismatic megafauna – pandas, whales, and so on – to gain public support for efforts to protect not just those fauna, but the ecosystems of which they are part. Terralingua in similar manner frames languages, specifically those spoken in ecologically rich environments, as repositories of valuable ecological knowledge, and as emblems of environmentally integrated cultures. In this rhetoric lexicons have a special place as embodiments of collective knowledge of nature, and so ethnosience or cognitive anthropology takes on new meanings as a way of documenting local aboriginal knowledge.

Language and Environment

The rhetoric which ties language to environment or locale has considerable power, at least for American audiences, but it is also limited in its scope and portability. It does not fit well, for instance, languages spoken in environments not

characterized by ecological megadiversity, for instance subsistence agrarian communities which have purposely reduced local ecological diversity in the course of cultivating food or cash crops. It also leads to fine discriminations between languages which show more or less intimate linkages with an environment, as a quick example shows.

Sercombe^{2,3} working in the interior of Brunei, on the island of Borneo, has described a group of ethnic Penan whose older members, once hunter-gatherers, were sedentarized some thirty-six years ago. They have transmitted their Penan language to their descendants, who continue to use it among themselves, at least for the time being. Closely related dialects are also spoken by members of other still-nomadic Penan groups in the eastern, Indonesian parts of the island. But the new residential pattern of the speakers in question has brought them into proximity with speakers of Malay and Iban, and led, Sercombe says, to an apparent loss of ethnobotanical lexicon, and so of lexicalized forest-related knowledge more generally.

This is concomitant with this community's break from its »natural« environment, even though its current locale is in close proximity to forests they previously inhabited. But the loss of lexical richness has made their variety of Penan, relative to other dialects, a poorer repository of linguistic diversity, and so presumably a less valuable target, vis-à-vis these other dialects, for preservation in the name of ecological diversity. Though its speakers are not members of a migrant group in the usual sense, their language already appears to have been dislocated from its place, at least from a strongly environmental point of view.

Preservation of Linguistic Diversity

The second rhetoric of endangered languages I want to discuss keys to a dif-

ferent biological metaphor, and another keyword which figures in the title of our conference: diversity. Unlike the environmental rhetoric, which foregrounds unitary relations between languages and locales, this second approach emphasizes instead underlying unity of all languages as specific manifestations of a universal human capacity. It attributes value to the structural properties of particular languages in the aggregate, rather than in isolation, and portrays the cumulative diversity of the whole as what is threatened by the death of any one language, each a token of a quasi-biological semiotic type.

This rhetoric shows an obvious and strong continuity not just with received goals and methods of contemporary linguistics, but with the older nineteenth century paradigm of comparative philology, which I can sketch very briefly here with reference to one of that discipline's major figures, August Schleicher. Schleicher developed now canonic styles for presenting structural evidence and historical conclusions about the diversity-within-unity of Indo-European languages, and pattern of migrations which led to their dispersal along with speakers. Contemporary proponents of work on endangered languages have now globalized this picture of the past, for instance, Nichols' *Linguistic diversity in space and time*⁴.

Schleicher is also famous as the first linguist to have transposed Darwin's natural history of speciation to the study of linguistic diversity, a linkage which is now being renewed in work like *The rise and fall of languages*, Dixon's account⁵ of linguistic diversification and death which has explicit recourse to the evolutionary biologist Gould's punctuated equilibrium model of speciation. Conversely, the statistical ecologist Sutherland⁶ has described parallels between the endangerment of languages and species on a global basis by assuming that languages count as differentiable members of a species, instead

of part of the fabric of shared experience in communities of speakers.

Unlike romanticist approaches to endangered languages, which are oriented to preserving languages in their environments, comparativist approaches like these privilege gathering of data of use for later study. From this point of view, the problem of language death poses problems for research methods, which has led to refinements like those proposed by Himmelman⁷, who argues that two distinct phases of research be recognized: comprehensive documentation on one hand, and data assessment on the other. The same concern with bodies of data, more than communities of speakers, is evident in predictions by Whalen, president of an American academic *cum* activist organization called the Endangered Language Fund. Whalen has argued that new information about endangered languages will transform theoretical linguistics, thanks to the power of computer technology not just to aid the analysis of data sets, but to make them highly portable via the world wide web.

But these linguists need to recognize that their work can be regarded by others in less charitable ways. The American linguistic anthropologist Hill⁸ has rightly pointed out that these do not have to be perceived as neutral interests without collateral effects. She shows why speakers of endangered languages can be suspicious, for instance, of what she calls »hyperbolic valorization« of diversity, which is very common in pronouncements on endangered language. Hinton⁹ makes the representative comment that »the world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used.« Claims about the global value of diversity serve to make each language important to all humans, and so in one way or other give non-speakers a stake in them, which in turn can justify or license claims of access

to those languages by linguists, as professional outsiders, whose work is done not in the name of speakers but »the world,« or »humanity« at large. Global claims can appear self-interested for speakers of endangered languages who find themselves dealing with outsiders who may not even be concerned to learn to speak their languages. Hill cites as cases in point speakers of Hopi and Cupeno, in the American Southwest, whose felt rights of ownership of their languages lead them to reject claims of access by non-speakers seeking to write down and publish information about them. It is worth keeping in mind similarities between appeals to the »common linguistic heritage of humanity« on one hand, and claims on the »common natural heritage of humanity« on the other, which have been used by governments and nongovernmental organizations around the world to license their interference in local community access to natural resources.

Language Rights Issue

The third and last rhetoric I will discuss centers on languages as objects of claims to rights, addressed to some sort of authority, sacred or secular. In fact the transcendent authority of God is invoked by the oldest, perhaps most effective, and perhaps also most intrusive organization working to preserve endangered languages, the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The group's so-called Linguistic Creed, by Elson¹⁰, posted on their website, asserts that because language is the most distinctly human and basic of God-given characteristics, all languages deserve equal respect and careful study, as part of the heritage of the human race.

Elson is animated by a Protestant doctrine of salvation through acquaintance with scriptural truth, and a belief in language rights which are legitimized through religious doxa. Elson is also careful to

stipulate the importance of print-literacy in guarding language rights, and it is easy to read this as one more Westernizing element of missionary projects more generally. But it is worth asking by the same token what sort of attempt to defend or establish language rights might be made without recourse to print literacy, along with other exogenous media. I will come back to that question later.

Broader, better publicized claims to language rights have been made in the secular Euro-American tradition, as is evident in the preamble of the 1996 Barcelona Universal declaration. But I would argue that the Barcelona declaration is utopian because it brings about two kinds of crucial contingencies. First, it assumes that such claims must be recognized as legitimate by authorities to which they are addressed, and this is not always true. During the so-called Asian values controversy of the 1980's for instance, politicians from Singapore and Malaysia criticized human rights activism as a Euroamerican strategy, thinly disguised, to extend its »soft power« in an age of postcolonial imperialism. They counterposed to it a distinctively reified Asian version of rights: the rights of the collective – family, community, state – over the individual. At the same time, a Speak Mandarin campaign in Singapore was leading descendants of migrants from southern China, who make up the majority of the city-state's populace, to abandon native »dialects« of their ancestors – Hokkien, Hakka, Fujianese, and so on – for Mandarin¹¹. This campaign's success testifies to their willingness to accede to the city-state's claims on them as citizens, and the legitimacy of the state's valuations of linguistic difference.

The second important salience of the Barcelona declaration involves the shaping effects which technologies have on languages to which rights are claimed. Even when efforts to preserve languages

are made with full sensitivity to local vales and autonomy, they can have the effect of suppressing language difference. One example is the likely linguistic future of the island of Lombok, just east of Bali. Linguists have roughly distinguished five native »dialects« there, under the rubric Sasak. They form a complex continuum, which can be broken down into two mutually unintelligible groups. Foreign development workers there, seeking to implement their programs in full awareness of the rights of local people as active participants, hired a linguist consultant, Ajamiseba, to help foster what he describes as a local »sense of ownership of what is going to be done in and through the project«¹².

Ajamiseba determined that one dialect, which linguists have come to call Ngeno-ngene, should be used in printed material and educational work around the island. In this way he codified that dialect, *de facto*, as a proto-standard dialect of bahasa Sasak codified and disseminated via print literacy. Observation of and respect for social and linguistic

rights, in other words, requires work that may well lead to language loss. And it is hard to call this a bad thing for, say, a monolingual mother concerned for the health of her children in an area where Hepatitis B is endemic.

My concern with this example, and throughout this paper, is to emphasize the need for sensitivity to the ways these three different rhetorics of language rights play out in local situations. I have the distinct ideological underpinnings of these three ways of getting »language rights« not in an effort to decenter, deconstruct, or debunk any of them. I seek instead a sharper sense of their uses for framing and perhaps engaging different kinds of rapid sociolinguistic change. Recognized as something other than global names for global goals, each can be more rhetorically effective for representing different sorts of sociolinguistic issues for different audiences. Understood as means it can help open up situated particulars which should guide decisions about language related work, including the possibility of doing no work at all.

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J. Errington

*Department of Anthropology, Yale University, P.O. Box 208277 Yale Station, New Haven
CT 06524, USA*

e-mail: j.errington@yale.edu

JEZIČNA PRAVA I PROMJENA JEZIČNE TRADICIJE

S A Ž E T A K

»Ugroženost«, »gubitak«, »smrt« i slični pojmovi sve su učestaliji u opisima sociolingvističkih promjena koje se danas javljaju u nevidenoj mjeri kao posljedica globalizacijskih strujanja. Takvi pojmovi služe kao nazivi kojima se izražavaju obostrani interes jezikoslovaca i antropologa i kao opisni termini za različite društvene situacije budući da su podložni višestrukoj primjeni i različitim interpretacijama. U ovom se članku navode tri različite strategije za smanjivanje ugroženosti marginaliziranih jezika i govornih zajednica. Priznavanje njihovih ideoloških temelja pridonosi većoj osjetljivosti za njihovu različitu primjenu i razvija svijest o društvenom značaju kojeg jezični opis može imati za marginalizirane zajednice.