

Visions and Realities: Researcher-Activist-Indigenous Collaborations in Indigenous Language Maintenance

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Introduction

Figures concerning the current state and potential fate of the world's languages are undeniably grim.¹ Of some 6,000 or more languages currently spoken in the world today, as few as 10% of these or about 600 may be considered likely to survive well past the end of the next century. The remainder are considered by many to be moribund, endangered or at best, threatened. Without an immediate and concerted effort to preserve and revitalize them, the majority of the world's languages may well, as it is routinely put, die out within a handful of generations.²

We use the biological metaphors of “death” and “endangerment”, in addition to the more neutral “shift”, to describe the phenomena which these figures highlight, that is, the state of affairs in which the speakers of one language cease to use their native tongue and cease teaching it to their children, instead adopting *en masse* the linguistic habits of a competing linguistic-cultural group. The aim of the first section of this paper is to argue that “language death” is not a natural phenomenon. In particular, I seek to dispel certain myths about language—among them the view that certain languages are more suited to the modern world than others—myths which often lead to resignation on the part of many who would otherwise seek to maintain their traditional linguistic identity and heritage. To understand this claim it is important to distinguish “death” (the ultimate result of “shift” on the part of all speakers), from *evolution*. For instance, although we speak of Latin as a “dead” language, it has not disappeared in the way that so many indigenous languages have around the world. Rather Latin has gone through a process of diversification into various dialects and subsequently into distinct languages such as Italian, French and Occitan. Latin has evolved, leaving many descendants. In cases of shift, the language's lineage ends, leaving no descendant languages. An analogy to biology may be instructive: at the level of the

species change and evolution are natural processes and over time, new species evolve or descend from old. Total extinction, though, is an abrupt, and arguably by and large unnatural phenomenon (Harmon 1995).

Having shown that language shift is not a linguistic phenomena, I will explore in the second section of this essay the thesis, advanced elsewhere, that language shift or death is at heart a social, political and economic phenomenon. In particular, the process is always the result of imbalances of power among linguistically-defined groups; it is always the result of social, political or economic inequality. For example when speakers of Itelmen on Kamchatka as a group give up their language in favor of Russian, the language of the colonial power, the (apparent) choice to do so is in no way motivated by linguistic properties of either language.

In the final section, I discuss some reasons why I believe this to be an important point. First, if what I argue is correct, namely that language shift/death is a reflection of social inequalities, then the figures cited at the beginning of this talk reflect a dire situation throughout the world, and should give us a moral impetus to consider the status of and relationships among various ethnic groups in the societies we live in (see Thieberger 1990, Bobaljik & Pensalfini 1996). In addition, a proper understanding of the roots of language shift suggests the means by which those interested can work to address the causes and not just the symptoms, in order to achieve long-term and stable solutions. Finally, the myth of inevitability or naturalness in language shift can only hamper efforts to reverse the process and to revitalize indigenous languages; dispelling this myth could play an important role in increasing vital community awareness and involvement in language reclamation movements.

Language Shift is not about Languages

In working with various linguistic communities around the world one regularly encounters the view that many languages, especially indigenous languages without a written tradition, succumb to larger, dominant colonizing languages by a natural process akin to Darwin's natural selection, or "survival of the fittest." Often, one hears ideas such as the following even from members of the indigenous communities engaged in preserving their traditional languages and cultural knowledge:

- “There is no (written) grammar or dictionary of our language; how are our children to learn it?” or
- “Our language is too complex, too difficult for children, it is natural that they should learn English first,” or
- “Our language is not suited to the modern environment, to modern technology, it lacks the words for things we need to talk about in our everyday lives in the end of the twentieth century.”

Such views are encouraged by the “western” educational tradition, with its Eurocentric grammatical tradition and arbitrary elevation of a “literary standard” in relation to which all other speech forms are labeled “sub-”standard. Such views are deeply ingrained even in the consciousnesses of many members of indigenous communities around the globe. I suggest, though, that these views are misguided: one of the lessons of the past century of linguistic research is that no language is too complex or rigid for children to learn (indeed, almost effortlessly) nor is any language less suited to adaptation and survival in the modern world than any other. To see this, let us reflect in turn on the view points just cited.

In the first place, consider the role of writing in the transmission of language from generation to generation. To be sure, literature is a wonderful and beautiful thing, and written language is an enormously useful tool for communication, for the transmission of ideas, for remembering history, etc. But writing is just that—a tool. It is a medium through which language may be recorded, but writing is not itself language, nor does language exist only through its being written. In most parts of the world, writing is a relatively recent innovation, and widespread literacy is a particularly novel development. Throughout history—including the present era in many parts of the world—children have successfully learnt the language of their parents without the medium of the written word. In the natural case, children effortlessly acquire the languages spoken around them at a very young age, typically the languages of their primary care-givers: parents, grandparents, siblings, etc. Five hundred years ago, while literacy was not widespread in, e.g., Russia or England, the languages Russian and English were being routinely transmitted from generation to generation in every household, without the use of writing. While much of the world may not be literate now, and certainly most of the world was not literate in the recent past, essentially *everyone* speaks a language, a language which they learned as a child, not in schools or from dictionaries and grammars, but from hearing the language spoken

around them. Thinking about the history of language transmission leads us unavoidably to the conclusion that writing is not necessary for the child learning its mother tongue. From this, it follows directly that a language does not become extinct, nor is it abandoned by its speakers, simply because it has no written form.

The second point of view to consider is the notion that some languages are simply too complex for children to learn easily, and thus they will more naturally learn a “simpler” language such as, e.g., Russian or English. This too is a myth, clearly falsified upon inspection. It was recognized as early as the beginning of this century by prominent scholars such as Edward Sapir (who had extensive knowledge of native American languages) that all languages were fully developed and richly complex. More importantly, it is easy, upon reflection, to see that no language could be too complex for children to master.

Consider Itelmen or Cherokee as examples of languages which look to us enormously complex: each verb that takes a subject and an object has literally hundreds of forms: prefixes and suffixes are used to indicate not only whether the action was in the past present or future (as in English: *talk*, *talked*) or Russian (*govorju*, *govoril*), and who the subject of the action was, (English *I talk*, *she talks*, Russian *ja говорю*, *ты говоришь*), but also who or what the object of the action is, and whether there were one or many objects or whether the action took place once or was repeated, or whether the speaker knows about the action directly or only from having heard about it, and many other pieces of information. Many of the sounds and combinations of sounds found in Itelmen and Cherokee are alien to our (linguistically) European ears, and difficult to pronounce (speakers of Itelmen with whom I’ve worked caution me that I might break my tongue if I’m not careful in trying to produce the sounds of their language!). Such complexity has persisted in these languages for thousands of years. That is, for thousands of generations, children have successfully mastered the complexity of the Itelmen and Cherokee languages and the thousands of others like them, without any formal instruction. Complexity in language is not a new invention, it is natural and fundamental, and there is no way in which children have difficulty with mastering the complexities of their native languages.

Indeed, if we think about the change of languages over time, we can demonstrate straightforwardly that complexity presents no barrier to language transmission and acquisition by children. If complexity were difficult for children to master, then difficult complexities would disappear over the

course of a few generations. Consider the following scenario: a hypothetical language is so complicated the way it is spoken by one generation that their children can not master these complexities. The form of the language that the children speak thus does not have the difficult complexities that their parents' form has. As the children grow older, and have children of their own, these children will also fail to learn the complexities of what is now the grandparents generation. By the time the original generation (the grandparents) have all passed away, there will be no one left who speaks this hypothetical language in its complex form. The complexities would have vanished. In reality, the complexities in the Itelmen and Cherokee verbs have persisted for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The very existence of complex languages, remaining complex from generation to generation, proves, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that complexities in language do not pose an insurmountable difficulty to acquisition of these languages by children, and are thus not a cause of language loss.

The third point, concerning adaptability, falls to similar reasoning, history again showing that all languages are malleable. Borrowing or creation of new words for new objects, is a natural part of every language. Familiar examples of borrowing from diverse sources abound in English and Russian, but the integrity of these languages has not been threatened by these borrowings.³ Similarly, a language like Itelmen not only has a large store of words borrowed recently from Russian, but also has words of clear Koryak, Chukchi and Eskimo-Aleut origin, and probably Ainu words; many Eskimo and Inuit languages show Russian and Chukchi borrowings, but are clearly Eskimo and Inuit languages nonetheless. It is in fact a quite general property of languages in contact around the world that they borrow from one another while maintaining their own integrity. In addition to borrowing, all languages also coin new terms and productively derive new words from old to respond to newly arising needs. That languages have clearly adapted to changing technology and innovation throughout history without difficulty shows equally clearly that a lack of adaptive flexibility cannot be invoked as a cause for language shift and loss.

As a final brief aside on this topic, it would be conceivable to admit the above points, but to still maintain that what is different in the modern context is the choice available to speakers of indigenous languages. For example, in my travels I have encountered the opinion that, though Itelmen is not too complex for children to acquire outright, in a situation in which children are

exposed to both Itelmen and Russian, they will necessarily take the option perceived to be “easier,” i.e., Russian. Careful reflection reveals this to be but a subtly nuanced version of the preceding themes and can be shown to be incorrect by the same reasoning. For one thing, “overall complexity”—to the extent that there is a meaningful notion corresponding to it—is difficult to judge. I have noted above that Itelmen verbal inflection is much more complex (on the face of it) than Russian verbal inflection, but Russian adjectival and nominal inflections are in many ways much more complex than the corresponding Itelmen inflections. Russians exposed to Itelmen do not decide on these grounds that Itelmen would be easier for their children to learn, nor did children raised in multilingual communities grow up to speak a hybrid of the two, taking the simplest components of both. In no discernible sense can Russian really be said to be less complex overall than Itelmen, or to pose from a linguistic perspective, any less difficulty to children attempting to acquire their first language. The choice was not for something that was the simpler of two options. Rather, it was, as it so often is, the language of the colonial power which was arbitrarily—from a linguistic perspective—taken to be simpler.

Examining the outcomes of different situations of language contact throughout history serves also to point out what may be a relevant peculiarity of the modern era, namely that language shift has replaced bilingualism as the norm. Even today in large parts of the world, and likely in most of the world at some point in history, people have some level of proficiency in more than one language. An oft-cited example is Pakistan, where the national language, Urdu, is spoken by most of the population, but for less than 10% is it their mother tongue. Many children grow up in this country of 68 languages speaking a local language and one or more regional lingua-francas, in addition to the national Urdu which they learn in school and from media.⁴ Underlying this change in the outcome of language contact is another implicit premise: a misunderstanding of the potential of bilingualism.

Above, I gave three examples of reasons why speakers of an endangered language may see it to be better for their children to learn the language of the economically dominant group. A fourth is the often tacit and implicit assumption that the choice facing the child (or the parent) is a choice of one language or the other, e.g., Itelmen or Russian. Often, the possibility of bilingualism at some level is not considered. When the idea is raised, many people believe that bringing up a child with more than one language is detrimental

or at best confusing for the child. Yet an examination of the scientific literature on bilingualism shows that, for the most part, this view is unfounded.⁵ Bilingualism brings numerous benefits at many levels, not the least of which being the removal of linguistic barriers to social, political and economic integration into the larger society without having to give up the traditional ties. Monolingualism, in the words of an Australian teachers' association's bumper sticker, "can be cured."

The main thrust of this section has been to dispel the notion that language shift or death is the result of natural, linguistic processes analogous to the "survival of the fittest" in biology. Linguistically, no language is "fitter" than any other for the rigors of the modern, or traditional, world, nor is any language too cumbersome or arcane. It is not properties of languages that cause one to be selected over another in instances of language contact, but rather the power relations among the groups involved. Even accepting the existence of these relations, the fact that the outcome is not bilingualism on the part of the less-dominant group, but rather the perception of the necessity of a choice between languages, is also not the result of any linguistic property. Even with the social pressures in place that make exclusive use of one group's traditional language unfeasible, there is no cognitive-linguistic reason why that language should have to lose all of its function.

In short: languages do not die natural deaths. Groups of speakers of one language switch in a short period of time to become speakers of another language for reasons having to do with the social, political and economic dynamics of interactions among groups.

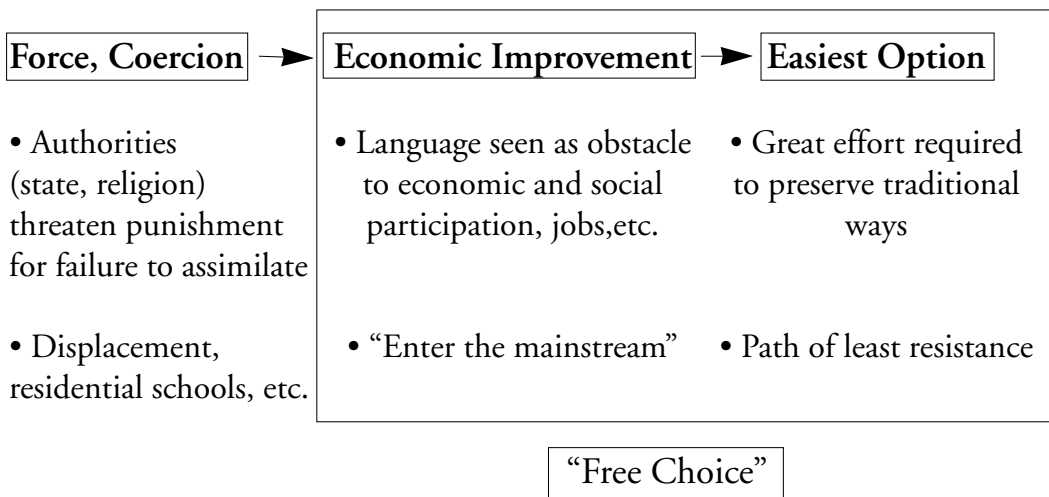
Language Shift is a Social, Political and Economic Phenomenon

What I have shown in the preceding pages, I hope, is that many of the reasons which are often perceived as underlying language shift are rooted in false assumptions. These apparently linguistic reasons mask the deeper social and political factors at work. Before proceeding to the final section, I will take a few words to outline some of the more salient aspects common to language endangerment situations around the world. This will allow me to state more clearly what I see as the nature of the social, political and economic inequalities that lead to language shift. In turn, we may then sharpen the implications that this has both for the need to address the causes of language endan-

germent, and better formulate general aspects of an appropriate response.

As we have been discussing, total language shift occurs—a language is said to “die”—when the language ceases to be transmitted from one generation to the next, when all the people who speak it turn to another language as their mode of communication. Of course, just as individuals switch their linguistic habits for a variety of reasons, so too the reasons for which different groups switch their linguistic habits are varied. They can, though, generally be seen as falling into a continuum which ranges from force and coercion at one extreme, through an (apparent) choice to assimilate to a different cultural/linguistic group in order to improve one’s life or that of one’s descendants, to a simple ‘path of least resistance’ in those situations where some switches are simply in conformity with the actions the rest of a group.

FIGURE 1: Reasons for language shift: a continuum.



That force and coercion—as when children are punished for using their native languages, or laws are enacted making the use of some language illegal—are social and political factors is beyond question. It is the other end of the continuum to which the preceding pages speak. Many cases of language shift appear to be the result not of any overt measure of coercion, but rather of a choice by people themselves to assimilate to a larger or dominant cultural-linguistic group, phrased often in terms of integration or modernization. Nevertheless, when one examines these apparent choices carefully, one finds inequalities and often discrimination lurking in the background.

For example, speakers of many native American languages have chosen to teach their children English as a first language, for the stated reason that they wish their children to have “better opportunities” than they had, or they hope that their children will avoid some of the “shame” or “discrimination” that the parents suffered. Parallel situations are noted around the world, and many observers have stressed that these are often conscious decisions rooted in the communities involved (see especially Ladefoged 1992). Left out of the discourse, though, is the question of *why* the perception (often accurate) exists that life will be somehow improved by abandoning the traditional ways in favor of another (generally colonial, dominant) language. Digging deeper, one finds that parents who decide to spare their children in this way are often those who have suffered—in many cases physically—for their linguistic and ethnic identity. Earlier this century, for example, native American children were sent to residential schools and punished for the use of their language. As children and adults, they suffered discrimination systematically from the government and from economically dominant sectors of society. It is only natural that, in raising their own children, the parents would want to spare them this deplorable aspect of life. On the surface, it is a “choice” to not teach one’s children their ancestral language, but viewed from this perspective, the external pressures of discrimination have forced the decision long before.

At this point a biological parallel is perhaps somewhat apt. Most (though not all) species recently extinct or currently threatened with extinction have not been directly eradicated, but have succumbed rather to the pressures of a loss of their environment. The extinction of species is not a matter of an annihilatory policy, but is rather a side-effect of the consumption of natural resources and the vast demands on the natural environments that it entails. The parallel which should be instructive for us in understanding the dynamics of language shift then is that we must focus on the parallel to an environment. While in some cases languages are lost under direct policies, in the end of the spectrum above discussed as “choice”, we may understand that the choices are reflections of human survival in response to an environment that is being encroached upon. Languages die because the cultural environments which sustain them are eroded from the outside. People choose to give up their languages not because their languages are unsuited to their lives, but because they are faced with an overwhelming social and economic pressure to assimilate. Without such pressure, there would be no reason to have to make such a choice.

Implications and Directions Toward Solutions

The inescapable conclusion from the preceding discussion is that language shift, even when it seems to be a matter of free choice by peoples interested in bettering their lives or those of their descendants, is most often the result of socio-political or economic pressures to abandon traditional means and manners and to assimilate to a more economically dominant group. This fact leads in two important directions, suggesting partial answers to the questions: *why should we care?* and *what can we do about it?*

That language shift is a socio-political and economic issue means that the figures given at the outset of this article underline a moral imperative to address the situation—it is not only a matter of aesthetic judgment that there is beauty in diversity [though I do not intend by this comment to diminish the importance of that judgment], nor is it a matter of concern only to scholars of language and related fields, but importantly, the number of different groups of people threatened by the imminent loss of their traditional languages is a barometer reflecting severe imbalances and inequalities among various peoples the world over. If one examines each case where a language is in danger of disappearance, one will find many in which there are direct and systematic discriminatory practises leading in this direction. Even in the many cases where there are no such clearly overt pressures on the language—even in the many cases where for individuals it truly is a matter of choice to switch linguistic habits—these choices are not without reason and are, as we have seen above, only reflections of a much deeper pressure from a more systematic inequality.⁶

The second point to be made has to do with the question of response. If language loss is not a linguistic phenomenon, but rather a symptom of deeper social inequalities, then an adequate and effective long-term response must address the causes and not the symptom. If languages die because the environments in which they propagate themselves are eroded, then a truly long-term solution to language shift must be to protect, restore and reclaim those environments. A focus on language *per se*, as in the preparation of grammars, dictionaries, and pedagogical materials satisfies short-term needs, but does not address the long-term, underlying social roots of language loss. With limited resources and energy, this tension between long-term goals and short-term needs is of course a familiar one, not least from struggles for social change the world over.

The long- and short-term goals may thus be seen as the *visions and realities* of the title of this article. The vision is one of a more just and equal society, in which people need not fear punishment or exclusion from the fruits of society for maintaining their traditional identities. As long as this goal is not attained, there will always be pressure, overt or subtle, for disadvantaged peoples to give up their languages and assimilate to the (usually economically) dominant groups. The reality is that such a change will be long in coming. If the problems of the short term are not addressed now, i.e., in the short-term, the possibility looms that many languages and cultures will disappear before the long-term vision can be realized. Indeed, many endangered languages are now in the precarious situation where only the oldest generations speak them. In such cases, even a social-political solution, i.e., restoration of the cultural environment where the language is spoken, will not be sufficient to maintain the language in living memory. Both the long- and short-term goals must be addressed for any possibility of language revitalization to be effective and sustainable.

Understanding this, and the resulting tension in a world of limited resources, leads to an appreciation of one potential role of the researcher in the broader picture, and of the role of collaboration or coordination among researchers and indigenous activists (keeping in mind that these categories may and often do overlap in a single person). Given the immediacy of the problem of language shift, the development of linguistic resources and/or programs of language instruction is clearly of the utmost urgency, especially in those communities in which the younger generations no longer hear the language in the home environment. Programs of reasonable success have been started around the world and are reported throughout the literature. These are of course the specialization of the researcher and require a collaborative effort with speakers of the languages concerned.

Moreover, while such measures do not themselves address the long-term goals outlined above, there is a clear way in which the linguistic strategies may be coopted by indigenous activists and be used as a tool in the more long-term strategies. For one thing, linguistic research, the recording of texts and the development of language materials, including texts, literacy programs and the like can increase community awareness and prestige for the traditional language. These are important steps within the community towards dispelling the myth that the traditional language is unsuited to the modern world (identified above), and towards raising awareness of the fact that lan-

guage loss is not inevitable. Since the cultural environment is, in the local sense, the community in which the language has been spoken, the actions and attitudes of the community towards its language are important to any revitalization process.

A second way in which the role of linguistics in some instances may increase the prestige of the language and raise awareness of the issues involved beyond the immediate community is in the simple fact of the presence of international researchers, lending a certain measure of the prestige of international attention to the problems faced. This is obviously a delicate matter, and for many disadvantaged communities, attention of this sort brings trouble as well as protection. Nevertheless, in some cases with which I am familiar, international attention has brought with it a modicum of respect and awareness from outside the indigenous community. This type of attention makes it, in the best-case scenarios, somewhat harder for blatant discrimination to continue unscrutinized and unchallenged, (though we must admit that this is not true everywhere). In other cases, popularizing the struggle for language (and cultural) survival efforts has resulted in increased private (and to a lesser degree public) funding of such efforts. Concrete examples of this can be found in many of the native American language revival programs.

Raising awareness, though, both within the indigenous communities and outside, does not often happen without conscious effort. It is important then, for linguists and other researchers concerned with the longer term goals of social justice, to work to raise the consciousness of the people whose attitudes contribute to the injustice underlying language loss.

This responsibility raises the spectre of a dilemma, articulated well by linguist Peter Ladefoged (1992: 10):

Many of the younger people want to honor their ancestors, but also to be part of a modern [society]. 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.

Ladefoged asks, essentially: *Who are we as linguists to dictate to indigenous groups how they should live their lives?* Building on this, he advocates a strategy of “professional detachment”: assembling data about languages and then leaving it to the local peoples to decide what to do with it. It is, of course, ultimately the decision of individual parents whether or not to bring their

children up in the milieu of their ancestral languages, and (when it is a decision) it is always one that will be fraught with complex emotional judgments and ties to the parents' lives. Similarly, it is often at local or regional levels that decisions are made about the curriculum of formal education. But Ladefoged's evaluation of the situation, I would argue, runs the risk of a dangerous oversimplification.

The subtle difference between the actions which Ladefoged warns against and the approach which I would advocate is brought out by Ladefoged's use of the word "persuade" in the above quotation. I am not advocating any attempt to dictate to indigenous peoples how they should lead their lives, nor would I advocate persuading them not to give up their language to reflect our value judgment, as linguists, that linguistic diversity is a good thing. I have argued, though, that the "choice" to assimilate linguistically is often not truly free—in the sense that it is constrained by a severely imbalanced power structure—and moreover, that this choice is influenced by potentially mistaken premises.

The fine distinction between the position exemplified by the above quote and the one I am trying to put forward may become clearer through an illustration. Consider the situation of the Itelmen people on Kamchatka, representative of hundreds, if not thousands, of similar situations around the world. The remaining fluent speakers of Itelmen number in the hundreds, if that, all elderly. The language is taught sporadically in the kindergartens and schools, and the language programs suffer from a chronic shortage of materials, teachers, and funding. People in the community are well aware of these facts. Many, of all generations, express a desire to see the language revived, though others do not. Some have sunk enormous efforts into the language programs, while others have resisted them. Local Russian authorities justify their refusal and resistance to grant the Itelmen privileges (guaranteed to native peoples under Russian law) on the grounds that these authorities see the Itelmen as fully assimilated—not a distinct ethnic minority—a view reinforced by the language situation. The linguist is in a unique position to provide certain tools for language revitalization, and the community members are free to choose to use these tools in whatever way is desired, as Ladefoged advocates. But communities are not monoliths with single points of view. Rather, they are groups of individuals, often with many shared views and perspectives, but often with diverse backgrounds, desires, and viewpoints; the choices which different community members make are made on

the basis of a certain understanding of their consequences and of a certain perception of the choices available to them. The linguist may be and often is in a position to bring another perspective to both of these questions, for example in raising the possibility of bilingual (and bicultural) education as a very real option, not detrimental to children, or in challenging the widespread notions of the inherent superiority of colonial or economically dominant languages. The freedom to choose is a powerful notion, but when rational decisions are based on false premises which are the result of social inequalities, can the decisions truly be said to have been made freely?

Consider a partial, but instructive analogy from the domain of political economy and discussions of freedom and equality. Economist Amartya Sen and others (see especially Sen 1992) use the notion of freedom from malnourishment as a simple example of a basic right or freedom. Economic inequalities clearly contribute to differences in the abilities of different people to exercise this right, e.g., some people simply do not have the economic resources to acquire an adequate, nutritious diet. But correcting for the economic disparity will not guarantee a healthy diet; even with sufficient funds, many people will simply make the wrong choices, either about what to purchase, or, more deeply about the importance of adequate nutrition. Though it could well be suggested that it is the economic inequalities which constrain the freedom to choose in such a scenario, the freedom to choose without the resources to make an informed choice fares little better in leading to a solution of the problem of malnutrition.

The analogy may not be perfect, but I believe it speaks clearly to the role of the linguist in the endangered language situation. To truly give others the freedom to choose in both of the above scenarios requires not only providing the immediate means with which to make decisions but just as importantly, sharing the knowledge and background from which an informed decision can be made. Without working to dispel the myth, common among so many people, that language loss is natural or inevitable, the linguist who simply provides materials for language programs, without working to raise consciousness of the social and political roots of language loss, is providing to the community important tools but is failing to provide instructions for their use. In some cases, the community finds these instructions in the work of indigenous activists, but in other cases, it is incumbent upon the researcher to raise awareness of the interrelatedness of language maintenance in the short run, and broader questions of social justice in the long. In such

an economically and politically skewed world, it is a fallacy to believe that one can remain truly “detached”—to do so is to support the status quo. As historian Howard Zinn has put it “You can’t be neutral on a moving train” (Zinn 1994).

Notes

- 1) I wish to thank Erich Kasten for inviting me to participate in the December 1997 Halle symposium; this paper is based on my presentation. In addition to the other symposium participants, I wish to thank Susi Wurmbrand, Lisa Wolverton, Rob Pensalfini, Ken Hale and Noam Chomsky, and colleagues at Harvard University for stimulating discussions of ideas represented here, some of which develop themes from Bobaljik & Pensalfini 1996. I am also especially grateful to the Itelmen people of Kamchatka for sharing their language and experiences with me.
- 2) These figures are from Krauss 1992. Harmon 1995 gives slightly more optimistic figures based on the information contained in *Ethnologue*, (Grimes 1992), though notes that the speaker censuses used for *Ethnologue* tend to generally be somewhat high. In even the more optimistic accounts, though, the majority of the world’s languages are thought to be facing extinction within a relatively short time frame, if current trends continue.
- 3) Of the 1000 most frequent words in English, 83% are of Old English origin. Of the next 4000 most frequent words, slightly less than half are of French origin, in large part the result of the Norman invasion of 1066 (O’Grady, Dobrovolsky and Aronoff 1989: 205).
- 4) Figures from *Ethnologue* (Grimes 1992).
- 5) See, e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas 1981 for a survey and evaluation. Note that there are many different levels of bilingualism, and that there is also a phenomenon which she calls “double semi-lingualism,” in which the child does not attain “standard” proficiency in either target language. It seems, though, that the causes of (double)-semi-lingualism are again largely socio-economic, and the existence of this phenomenon does not mitigate against the very real possibility of functioning bilingualism.
- 6) On this point, see in more detail Bobaljik & Pensalfini 1996 and especially Thieberger 1990.

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