Commentary: Broadening the Rhetorical and Descriptive Horizons in Endangered-Language Linguistics

The Position of the “Outside Expert”

Certain elements likely to produce alienation among endangered-language community members may well be inherent in the discourses of “expert” linguistic advocates, since linguists must speak as what they usually are: nonmembers of the language communities in question and members of a professional community that represents and therefore privileges a Western scientific tradition which may be (and usually is) radically different from whatever indigenous knowledge and belief systems prevail locally. If they are outsiders to the community, there are sharp limits to what most linguists can reasonably claim. They cannot claim to speak from the most intimate form of personal knowledge or experience, nor can they usually claim full familiarity with the traditions, lore, or even lexicon of a given language community. Because they seldom fully share religious beliefs and practices with any indigenous community they may wish to discuss, it can likewise be difficult (and even unethical) for them to produce entirely accurate representations of the spiritual beliefs that the community holds or to offer persuasive testimony to the value of such beliefs.

It is not the case, all the same, that linguistic advocacy is entirely a matter of abstract principle rather than of personal life experience and strongly held belief. On the contrary, linguistic practitioners represent very well, and often with great fervor, a set of beliefs deeply rooted in their own experience as participants in Western scientific tradition. The very call for rapid expansion of documentation that is currently heard from so many linguists resounds with such beliefs:

Our 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
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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. [Newman 1998:12]

Typologists, whose work benefits most particularly from the often little-known properties of small and understudied languages, share this sense of scientific mission. Speaking of languages in which kinship relationships are expressed by verbs rather than by nouns, Comrie and Haspelmath note (in a section of their publication headed, interestingly for our purposes, "The Treasures of Small Languages") that "only a handful of examples have been found, most of them small, little studied languages" (2001:7). So far, they also note, only one language has been reported in which tense markers appear on nouns as well as on verbs, namely Kayardild, an Aboriginal language spoken by fewer than 100 people on two islands off the northern coast of Australia: "Kayardild aside, nothing comparable has been attested to date, and had Kayardild died out before it was documented, such [nominal] tense markers would certainly have been considered impossible" (2001:7). They go on to stress the importance of uncovering additional information of special scientific value in sections on "Language Universals," "Traces of Prehistory," and "Global Geographical Patterns." Each of these topics represents a major research interest for scientific linguistics, but none of them is likely to be a topic of immediate interest to a small language community, or not at least in the general sense in which they are of interest to scholars. For example, to many peoples their own prehistory in the form of origin stories is central, but such stories relate to profound spiritual beliefs rather than to concerns about time depth and earlier population movements such as typically preoccupy linguistic scholars. Global geographical patterns are represented in Comrie and Haspelmath's publication by a preview sample of maps from The World Atlas of Language Structures, a volume in preparation under the auspices of Comrie and Haspelmath's home institution in Leipzig, Germany. On four world maps are plotted the occurrence of distinctive structures for sentence conjunction and noun-phrase conjunction, for numeral systems, for constructions with the verb 'to give', and for types of relative clause constructions, with geographical clusterings and relative rarity highlighted by the frequency or infrequency of dots of particular colors distributed across a given map. Both the universality of the features and the patterning of particular types of structures that embody them are of major interest to linguists, but it is hard to imagine that many endangered-language speakers would find it stirring or significant that some other language group perhaps half a world away uses a vigesimal numeral system up to the number 99, just as they do.

Linguists, of course, represent a particular knowledge system that uses certain rhetorics in its own support. In the Western belief system, scientific knowledge itself is—or ideally should be (hence the current debates about human genetic material and curative pharmaceuticals)—a fundamental part of what is subject to "universal ownership," and it can likewise be buoyed up by "hyperbolic valorization" in the form of celebratory (and sometimes self-congratulatory) claims about the triumphs attributable to scientific discovery procedures. Establishment and elaboration of the scientific paradigm has been one of the great boasts of Western intellectual tradition, and enumeration in various forms has long been central to that paradigm. If expert
advocates for endangered languages have been constrained by their typical nonmember status to focus on values external to the community’s own, the particular rhetorics they have chosen to employ, notably including those identified by Hill, have been understandably some of the same key rhetorics that they use to promote their own belief system as practitioners of Western science.

It is not surprising that the difference in focus of interest between professional linguists and speaker communities is large in connection with language. That linguistic professionals have often been inclined to set their own priorities so determinedly above those of speaker communities is unfortunate, however, and as Hill suggests, the use of rhetoric that is distressing to community members has been unnecessary. All of Hill’s suggestions for alternative rhetorics are practicable, and indeed as she notes they have already been employed by some endangered-language advocates: the rhetoric of humane concern especially by Fishman (1982, 1991) and the rhetoric of human linguistic genius in its unique local manifestations by Woodbury (1993) and Hinton (1994). The focus in these writings is less exclusively on benefits to science and more inclusively on benefits to the language community, a more usefully humane focus in itself.

**Linguistic Reductionism: Who Loses What in Language Shift?**

There are two particular distortions with which linguists might be charged when they offer assessments of the linguistic losses entailed in language shift. One is that they dote upon structural rarity and overemphasize it to the exclusion of other significant matters. The other is that they tend to reduce languages’ claims on our serious interest primarily to bare-bones structural properties.

There are various ways to correct for the professional narrowness of such approaches. Linguists might undertake to give an account of any special functions that a particular structural feature serves. In describing a language with vowel harmony, for example, a linguistic account that confines itself merely to noting the presence of vowel harmony and setting out the rules that govern it does the language less than justice if vowel harmony proves to play certain distinctive roles within the language in question—distinguishing native lexicon from borrowings, say, or contributing to the aesthetic qualities of verbal art. Another corrective would be to look at rarity from a community-centered perspective rather than only from the perspective of global frequency of occurrence, asking what significant features of a given contracting language are unavailable in the expanding language to which speakers are shifting. This means discussing those features of a language, structurally rare or not, that contribute most conspicuously to their distinctive “voice.” This is what Woodbury has done in the 1993 paper that Hill cites and still more extensively and effectively in a later paper on Cup’ik affective suffixes (Woodbury 1998).

It is instructive to look at the Celtic languages from this point of view. The striking feature of word-initial and word-final consonant mutation is much commented on in the literature and treated as a relative linguistic rarity. But in the Scottish Gaelic dialect with which I work, consonant mutations chiefly mark grammatical categories that English offers the means to mark as well (Dorian 1999). By contrast, one particular instance of quite ordinary suffixation gives East Sutherland Gaelic speakers scope for a degree of focus marking and contrast marking not available in English. This emphatic-deictic suffix can attach to several types of pronouns, to nouns, to
adjectives, and to one verb form, signaling emphasis or contrast; it also frequently indicates higher-than-average affect. Drawn on often and effectively by the dialect’s native speakers, in ordinary conversation and especially in narratives, the emphatic-deictic suffix can track the speaker’s line of argument or narrative thread, highlight contrasts, mark the special focus of interest, and establish affect that is sustained by recurrent instances of the suffix with various parts of speech. Repeated use of the unobtrusive suffix creates none of the sense of excessive emotionality that repetitious use of voice emphasis tends to produce in English. As might be imagined, given the functions involved, gifted Gaelic poets draw frequently on the standard-language counterparts of the East Sutherland Gaelic emphatic-deictic suffix, selectively and skillfully deploying their attention-focusing and contrastive power. Suffixation is of course anything but rare, whereas consonant mutation pressed into grammatical service (as opposed to, say, similar phonological alternations conditioned by intervocalic position) is much less common. There is therefore nothing about the form of the emphatic-deictic suffix that would attract special notice, yet its use is distinctive, frequent, and highly effective. Grammatical features that are prominent in single sentences, furthermore, have traditionally been treated more fully in grammatical accounts than have features more prominent in extended discourse. These two factors—a preoccupation with structural rarity and a relative neglect of extended discourse structure in basic grammatical descriptions—no doubt contribute to the relatively high level of attention given to consonant mutations in studies of Scottish Gaelic grammatical structure and the relatively little attention paid to focus-marking suffixes.

Yet focus marking is a particularly well-elaborated feature of Scottish Gaelic, much more central to its distinctive voice and its expressive potential than is anything made possible by consonant mutation. In addition to use of the emphatic-deictic suffix, for example, East Sutherland Gaelic marks focus and emphasis by frequent use of clefting and also by use of the reflexive pronoun /fhéin/ 'self'. Two such markers can be combined, and often are, to increase the effect still more, as in sentences with clefting and /fhéin/, such as /fe mi hian huag a stex er aj i/ 'It's myself [that] brought her [a fog-bound boat] back in', or with the emphatic-deictic suffix and /fhéin/, such as /va mi/ hian tu max kas a vur k*5nanu/ '[-emphatic] myself was going out to sea with them', (with /mi/ 'I' rendered emphatic in the second sentence by addition of the suffix /-J/). Use of clefting and the reflexive are so characteristic of Scottish Gaelic, in fact, that they carry over into English as stereotypes of the somewhat gaelicized English spoken by Highlanders, e.g., 'It's yourself that spoil the lad!' Without any counterpart to morphological focus marking in English, however, there is no way to reflect in English discourse the effect of this commonest of all the Gaelic focus markers. Consequently, the English of ordinary East Sutherland Gaelic speakers seems pale by comparison with the liveliness of their conversational Gaelic, to say nothing of the powerful contrastive and emphatic effects lost to Gaelic writers when their work is translated into English.

That is to say, the potential impact of a language shift resonates very differently for the local community of speakers and for the professional community of linguists. For linguists, the extinction of an undocumented or poorly documented language raises the painful possibility that an "impossible" feature such as nominal tense marking will disappear before it is even entered into the scientific record. For community members who still have some knowledge of the language, it means not only that
their children will not be able to speak their ancestral language and that they themselves will have ever fewer people to speak to in it, but also that there will be elements of meaning and affect that they were previously able to express with ease but that they will find difficult or impossible to express once they have shifted completely to use of another language. Where particular concepts are concerned, borrowing may offer a partial solution. Just as anthropologists can introduce the term *tabu* into their discourse, hoping to carry some of its special cultural and semantic resonance into English (or French, etc.) along with the word, receding-language terms can be introduced into neighboring expanding languages, carrying some of their referential power with them. But where the terms in question are part of fuller word sets that are derivationally or inflectionally as well as semantically related to one another, much will inevitably be lost if only the root or citation form is introduced.

Where the full meaning of a term hinges on its position within a distinctive pair or set of words that contrast with one another, semantic loss is also hard to avoid. For the Gaelic-speaking fisherfolk of East Sutherland, for example, subsistence modes and social identities divided at the most fundamental level into just two categories, *maraichen* ‘fisherfolk’ and *tuathanaich* ‘nonfisherfolk’. Both economic and social life were controlled by one’s membership in one group or the other, and although families from each of the two groups might in some few cases actually have lived in adjacent houses, formidable social barriers affected all their interactions, keeping them very sharply separate from one another. English, the language that has now very nearly replaced Scottish Gaelic in East Sutherland, has a few terms (such as *fisherfolk*) that can designate people who sustain themselves by sea-based work, but it has no single antithetical term that can encompass every other social and economic affiliation. The absence of terms with a semantic range equivalent to *maraichen* and *tuathanaich* in English blurs a fundamental social fact of life, and no social history could adequately portray social and economic conditions in the region without reference to both members of the terminological pair (and without an exposition of their semantic range in East Sutherland Gaelic).\(^3\) Quite generally speaking, lexicon that relates to the nonmaterial aspects of a traditional culture is particularly subject to distortion when introduced into an expanding language, and once again, much is inevitably lost in the process. Linguistic features such as these elude adequate representation on the maps of typologists or dialectologists and are only too likely to disappear unrecorded.

**Endangerment and the Documentation Imperative**

Newman, in the article cited above (1998), strongly endorses Dixon’s prioritization of documentation of disappearing languages: “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 can still be done” (Dixon 1997:144). Most linguists recognize documentation as a compelling need, and in fact language communities themselves increasingly invite linguists into their midst for that same purpose (see, e.g., Nagy 2000).

As suggested in the previous section, however, there may be imperfect consensus as to what constitutes adequate description. Description sufficient for a phonetician’s purposes may not satisfy a syntactician, and a typologist’s broad schematizations will not necessarily meet the requirements of a morphophonologist. All of these specialists’ concerted efforts will certainly leave sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists
dissatisfied, and ethnic groups hoping to revive a more or less moribund heritage language will likewise be ill served by the narrowness of most structural accounts. One of the few certainties of linguistic inquiry is that today's principal investigative focuses will not be tomorrow's. Given that we are recording now most of what will ever be known about many endangered languages, it behooves us to respond by expanding our focuses. The rhetoric of advocacy needs to broaden for all audiences so as to acknowledge the vastness of the research challenge, while the investigations need to widen so as to encompass more of the social and cultural as well as the structural range that each language uniquely represents. At the same time, as partisans of one particular knowledge system we would do well to attend to folklorist Barre Toelken's reminder that fieldwork is an "interhuman dynamic event with its own meanings, texts, and contextual peculiarities," lest we "run the risk ... of believing ourselves to be the objective beneficiaries of other peoples' traditions which we are free to submit to our analysis" (Toelken 1996:16).

Notes

1. In one notable case a scientific practitioner reevaluated his supposedly "sensitive" folkloristic fieldwork as a "reckless forty years of Navajo fieldwork" after finding that his interest in separate subsections and motifs in Navajo Coyote tales, legitimate scholarly inquiry in his own view, constituted a venture into witchcraft to his Navajo affines and that a string of family misfortunes was viewed in part as an outcome of his research (Toelken 1996:11–13, 16).

2. This suffix corresponds to three suffixed elements that exist independently in mainstream Gaelic dialects: an emphatic suffix, emphasizing particles that appear only with nouns modified by possessive pronouns, and a deictic enclitic (Dorian 1999:7).

3. It should be noted, in homage to the distinctiveness of local speech forms, that the East Sutherland semantic range of these terms is not necessarily matched in other Scottish Gaelic dialects, either. Although maraichean reliably designates people who live by work at sea, it is not universally the commonest Gaelic term for that meaning, and tuathanaich can mean simply 'farmers' in other Gaelic dialects.

4. Hymes has been one of the most insistent and effective spokesmen for the crucial difference between knowing the grammar of a language and knowing how to use the language; see, for example, Hymes (1974:49).

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