SHORT NOTE

Contact languages as “endangered” languages

What is there to lose?

Paul B. Garrett
Temple University

Introduction

The fact that a large and steadily growing number of the world’s languages are “endangered” has received increasing attention in recent years, in academic and professional forums as well as in the mass media. In general treatments of the topic, both scholarly and popular, a few case studies or anecdotes are typically used to lend an element of human interest and local color to the global statistics, which, though striking in and of themselves, are inevitably rather abstract. The languages chosen for this purpose tend to be relatively obscure and “exotic” ones: languages spoken by small communities in remote locales, sure to be very little known, if not entirely unknown, to the vast majority of readers/listeners/viewers. The choice of such obscure languages is in many ways an effective strategy, particularly for the mass media, and particularly for those that rely heavily on visual images, such as magazines and television. Portrayals of “traditional” peoples and their ways of life emphasize the poignancy and human tragedy of language loss by linking it to loss in other domains: for example, loss of culturally distinctive worldviews, ancient cosmologies and ritual practices, ingenious subsistence strategies that enable humans to survive in “harsh” physical environments, and intimate understandings of local ecologies and biodiversity.

Even in those treatments of language endangerment in which a particular language and its speakers are the main focus, ultimately some sort of univer-
salistic perspective is almost always taken. One prominent theme that often emerges is that the presumed reduction of “diversity” in various domains such as those mentioned above is an unfolding tragedy in and of itself, whether seen from a broad humanistic perspective or a somewhat narrower scholarly perspective (linguistic or otherwise). Another common theme is that the endangerment of languages is diagnostic of grave dangers facing not just those who speak them, but all of humanity, or all of planet Earth¹ – and by implication, the reader/listener/viewer and his or her own way of life. Taken together, these themes suggest both a fundamental equality and a profound unity among the world’s languages. It is presented as axiomatic that all human languages are equally valuable – not in practical or utilitarian terms, but in a more abstract or philosophical sense – and that each has its own unique place within a richly diverse but integrated whole that is ineffably greater than the sum of its parts. The “death” of any language, however “small” and obscure, is therefore an inestimable and irreversible loss; and the endangerment of any language is a matter worthy of everyone’s attention and concern.

Or is it? My purpose here is not to critique either scholarly or popular discourses on the issue of language endangerment. (Lately, critiques of these discourses seem to be proliferating almost as rapidly as the discourses themselves.) Rather, it is to consider the near-total omission of a particular category of languages from these discourses.² Hardly ever are contact languages even mentioned, much less focused upon, in discussions of language endangerment. But several of these languages have already met their demise – some quite recently, such as Negerhollands and Skepi Dutch Creole. Various others are currently on (or fast approaching) the brink of “death,” among them Michif, Mednyj/Copper Island Aleut, Rabaul German Creole/Unserdeutsch, Chinook Jargon, Trinidadian French Creole, Berbice Dutch Creole, and Pitcairn/Norfolk Island English Creole. Meanwhile numerous others, though in less dire circumstances at present, have far from certain futures: St. Lucian French Creole, Dominican French Creole, the English Creoles of the Central American coast (e.g. Miskito Coast, Limón, Bay Islands), Palenquero, Papia Kristang, and per-

1. Scholarly works in which these themes are made explicit include Harmon (1996), Maffi (2001), and Nettle & Romaine (2000).

2. Nonaka (2004) draws attention to another such category: indigenous and original (as distinct from national) sign languages.
haps dozens more. Why should the precarious state of so many languages go virtually ignored in discussions of language endangerment?\textsuperscript{3}

Marginal languages

To be sure, contact languages have always been “marginal” languages, as Reinecke (1937) put it several decades ago, and as has been repeated many times since. By and large this remains true today, despite the efflorescence of scholarship on these languages since the 1960s, the emergence of language advocacy movements in various places where they are spoken, and the fact that a few among them (such as Haitian, Tok Pisin, Papiamentu, and Seselwa) have been accorded significant degrees of official recognition and institutional support. But to what extent does this persistent marginality account for why contact languages are virtually never mentioned in discussions of language endangerment?\textsuperscript{4} It would seem that endangered contact languages

---

\textsuperscript{3} This is not to suggest that all or most other endangered languages are specifically mentioned by name in these discussions – clearly, the sheer number of languages in question makes this infeasible. This being the case, endangered languages are often referred to collectively, in geographically defined groupings: “Amazonian languages,” “aboriginal languages of Australia,” “Native American languages of the Pacific Northwest,” etc.

\textsuperscript{4} In a review article in which he considers multiple recently published books on language endangerment, Mühlhäuser (2003:243–44) comments, “It is worrying that none of the authors addresses the massive loss of Pidgins, Creoles, and other impure [sic] contact languages, the loss of jargons, cants and argots or indeed the loss of so-called dialects. We need to beware of the narrowly focussed discursive construction of endangered languages.” Following Mühlhäuser’s line of thinking on this issue a bit further, one notices that endangered contact languages go unmentioned in recent books by prominent contact language scholars that deal comprehensively with the full range of language contact phenomena (e.g. Thomason 2001 and Winford 2003; also Mufwene 2001, which highlights the development of contact languages, even those that are now endangered or defunct, but the endangerment of various non-contact languages, such as Native American languages and African languages in New World contexts). In these works, it may be noted in passing that specific contact languages – those used as case studies in the chapters devoted to pidgins, creoles, etc. – are endangered, but these same languages are not mentioned in chapters or sections devoted specifically to language endangerment; here the focus typically shifts to “classic” examples of endangered languages, such as Native American languages. This seems to reflect the general tendency for research on contact languages to focus on their origins and development, but to stop short of following their trajectories through to obsolescence and death. Important ex-
are in fact doubly marginalized: marginalized among the world’s languages in general, and then marginalized again among endangered languages. What accounts for this secondary marginalization? How are contact languages any more “marginal” than, for example, languages of Amazonia or Papua New Guinea that have only a few hundred speakers each – languages that are little known even among linguistic scholars?

In general terms, contact languages tend to have certain characteristics in common with endangered languages: on the whole, they are oral (unwritten) languages spoken by relatively small populations, lacking in political and economic power, who inhabit geopolitically remote areas such as small islands and tropical coastlines. These are among the characteristics that render the great majority of the world’s 6,000 or so languages “marginal” vis-à-vis a small few “world” languages such as English, Spanish, French, and Arabic, and vis-à-vis a few hundred other languages, from Turkish to Guarani to Catalan, that have the institutional backing of the nation-states within which they are spoken (or of a semi-autonomous political unit within the nation-state, as in the case of Catalan).

But contact languages also have certain other characteristics that render them marginal even among the remaining thousands of relatively small, relatively powerless languages. These characteristics are several, but can be grouped under two related themes. One is their relative lack of historicity; the other is their perceived lack of autonomy.

Shallow histories

The great majority of contact languages are of quite recent origins, having arisen no more than three to four centuries ago in contexts associated with European colonialism. (This is true even of some of those that do not have European lexifiers, e.g. Fanakalo and Lingala.) Thus these languages are, as Trouillot (1992) has said of Caribbean societies, “inescapably historical.” Their historicalness is an important part of what makes contact languages intriguing to linguistic scholars of various stripes: to a degree not possible with older lan-

---

guages, it is possible to identify (to varying degrees of precision and certainty, to be sure) the specific time, place, and circumstances of their origins, and to trace their developmental trajectories up to the present day.

But the pertinent issue here is not the rich historicalness of these languages. Rather, it is their relative lack of historicity (in Bell’s [1976] sense), which is quite another matter. Unlike historicalness, which is largely a matter of documentation and of painstaking research by specialists (usually academically trained professionals), historicity is primarily a matter of popular perception and ideology – of people’s folk understandings of the relationship between a particular language and their own (or someone else’s) ethnohistory.

A key point to consider in this regard is the fact that contact languages’ relative lack of historicity tends to attenuate their ties to specific geographical territories and to the contemporary inhabitants of those territories. In many cases, those who speak the contact language are not indigenous to the area that they currently inhabit; they or their forebears (going back relatively few generations) were transported there as slaves or indentured servants, or else migrated there as laborers, military conscripts, traders, or settlers. Whatever the case, and whatever the juridical status of their present-day claims to the land on which they live, they cannot easily assert the kinds of primordial (not to say incontestable) ties that can be asserted by an aboriginal population that has lived in a particular place since time immemorial. Errington (2003:724) notes, “Aboriginality can be leveraged...into claims of ownership, trumping rights of access that might otherwise be claimed by and granted to encroaching ‘outsiders.’ These are situations in which languages can take on value if they are portrayed as organically bound up with place and culture, and as likewise under threat of encroachment.”

As Errington’s observation also suggests, the ethnic identities of contact-language-speaking groups may be less coherent and less robust – in that they are less “focused” or more “diffuse” (LePage & Tabouret-Keller 1985), and therefore likely to be more open to negotiation and contestation – than those of any aboriginal group(s) with whom the territory may be shared. (That territory may itself be the object of competing claims between autochthonous and more recently arrived groups, as is currently the case in the interiors of Guyana and Suriname.) Further complicating these issues may be a more or less explicit awareness that the distinctive cultural traditions of contact-language-speaking groups in fact originate elsewhere, typically on a distant continent with which any direct ties have long since been severed. There may also be a more or less acute awareness that those traditions are in fact multiple and heterogeneous,
and have become irreversibly intermingled and hybridized – that is to say, creolized.

Lack of autonomy

Many of the same factors that account for contact languages’ lack of historicity also account for their perceived lack of autonomy. Historically, many if not most contact languages have been regarded (even by their own speakers) as merely “broken” or “corrupted” versions of the European languages to which they are self-evidently related. The fact that this relationship is primarily lexical makes it particularly salient for those who (unlike linguistic scholars) may be wholly unaware that relationships to other languages are discernible and indeed demonstrable at other levels of analysis. Complicating matters is the fact that where a contact language remains in contact with its lexifier, the existence of a continuum of intermediate lects typically blurs the boundary between the two. The resultant clinal effect may tend to make contact languages problematic as symbols of distinctive group identities (ethnic, national, or otherwise) – at any rate, more problematic than languages that have no such relationship to the dominant languages with which they coexist (as in the case of Native American languages in contact with English, for example).

Lack of autonomy can also present certain advantages, however. Mufwene (2003) remarks on a phenomenon that may actually favor the survival of creoles and other contact languages that remain in sustained contact with their lexifiers – thus providing an answer to the broader question of why non-standard, strongly stigmatized vernacular varieties perdure despite hegemonic, strongly normative pressures from standardized varieties “with which they have coexisted and in which their speakers acquire literacy.”

An answer to this apparent puzzle may lie in the fact that, despite linguists’ common claim that creoles are separate languages relative to their lexifiers, speakers of all these stigmatized vernaculars think that they speak the same language as the prestigious variety in which they are provided literacy. There is between their vernaculars and the standard variety a division of labor that

---

5. But see Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (1995) and Wolfram (1997) on the issue of dialect obsolescence, and the importance of studying it within the broader context of language obsolescence research.
creates no competition of the sort that would lead to the attrition or loss of the nonstandard and less prestigious ones. (Mufwene 2003:330–331)

Mufwene’s reasoning suggests that creoles and other “stigmatized vernaculars” that are in contact with dominant languages other than their lexifiers would tend to be in greater danger. This does indeed seem to be the case. To take some well-known examples from the Caribbean region – where such situations are quite common (Snow 2000) – Mufwene’s observation doubtless helps account for why Dutch-lexified creoles have fared poorly in contact with English; why the English-lexified creoles of the Central American coast are being displaced by Spanish; and why French-lexified creoles have gone into decline in those islands where French has been displaced by English, such as Trinidad and Grenada, and to a lesser extent, St. Lucia (Garrett 2000, 2005) and Dominica.6

This need not mean certain death for these languages; to be sure, numerous other factors must also be taken into consideration. Interestingly, such situations may actually offer certain advantages for language preservation/revitalization projects. Although these languages doubtless continue to suffer from their lack of autonomy vis-à-vis their lexifiers (many St. Lucians still speak of their creole as a kind of “broken French,” for example), at the local level, the contemporary absence of the lexifier, and the contact language’s self-evident difference of lexicon from the contemporary standard-official language, give the contact language considerably greater autonomy than its counterparts in continuum situations typically have (no St. Lucian would suggest that the French-lexified creole is in any sense the “same language” as English). This greater degree of autonomy may in turn serve to heighten public awareness of language endangerment at the local level and thus create more favorable conditions for language advocacy efforts, such as those currently underway in St. Lucia (Garrett 2000); and it may tend to make the language a more potent symbol of national and/or ethnic identity (Garrett in press).

6. Sasse’s (1992) multi-stage model of language death (via language shift) predicts that in the final stage, the obsolescent language may persist in a more or less vestigial form, serving emblematic functions; and that a distinctive variety of the language to which speakers have shifted, more or less strongly influenced by the obsolescent language, may have emerged. See Garrett (2005) and Garrett (2003), respectively, for discussion of such outcomes in St. Lucia – where both of these phenomena are currently in evidence, though language obsolescence is thus far not in its final stages and language death, while an imminent possibility, is not a foregone conclusion.
These considerations notwithstanding, it is certainly true that on the whole, contact languages’ lack of autonomy vis-à-vis their lexifiers renders them marginal. Advocates of these languages therefore face uphill battles (even more so than advocates of other endangered languages) at all levels: official and unofficial, local, regional, and international. Aside from the general reluctance of local governments and organizations to devote scarce resources to these languages, contact languages very rarely if ever attract any attention—or funding—from the handful of international organizations that are specifically devoted to the study, documentation, and preservation of endangered languages. Lack of involvement in such organizations by those of us who study contact languages may well be one factor in this, and is a matter well worthy of consideration. But there are surely larger issues, an important one being the pervasive tendency to privilege strongly autonomous languages over those that self-evidently (i.e. lexically) derive from previously existing languages. Errington (2003:724–25) notes the high value placed on distinctive, “relatively culturally salient lexicons” in language endangerment discourses: languages are portrayed as repositories of knowledge and experience, and their lexicons in particular as unique referential and classificatory systems the value of which “may only become apparent in the future.” Lexicons are thus regarded as “relatively isolable information bases...which are in danger of falling out of use before they are codified, or before the uses of information they embody are discovered.” By this logic, the lexicon of a contact language—a pastiche of second-hand materials rather hastily assembled (either crudely or ingeniously, depending on one’s ideological perspective), typically under extremely adverse circumstances, only a few generations ago—can hardly be expected to hold...
“priceless treasures” of knowledge or wisdom that must be safeguarded for the sake of all humanity.  

A final consideration is that some contact languages lack autonomy even from one another. The tendency of some francophone scholars to refer to all of the world’s French-lexified creoles in the singular as *le créole* comes to mind here, as do the guiding assumptions and practical objectives articulated by the transnational franco-creolophone movement known as the *Bannzil* (Hookoomsing 1993). A particular subset of the world’s French-lexified creoles, those of the Lesser Antilles, present a more focused (and therefore even more problematic) case in point. If, for example, Grenadian French Creole “dies out,” will a unique “language” have died out? Or just a local manifestation of a larger entity, referred to by some scholars as “Lesser Antillean French Creole,” that remains well established and may still have good prospects for continued survival in other nearby territories? In such a case, are we actually dealing with a case of language “death” at all, or merely a kind of geographical contraction? If the latter, should the endangerment of Grenadian French Creole generate as much concern (among Grenadians, *Bannzil* members, linguistic scholars, the general public) as the endangerment of a contact language such as Palenquero or Michif that is (arguably) more singular, both linguistically and sociohistorically?

What is there to lose?

A number of knotty questions have been raised, all of them relating in some way to the persistent marginality of contact languages. Given the two major reasons for that marginality that have been identified here – namely, their shallow histories and their lack of autonomy – the question that ultimately arises is: What is there to lose if a contact language “dies out”? The most obvious answer – so obvious that it borders on trivial, perhaps – is that some part of the world’s linguistic diversity is lost. A far more challeng-

8. See Hill (2002) on “hyperbolic valorization” and “universal ownership” as prevalent themes in the rhetorics of language endangerment.

9. Further complicating these issues are recent offshoot varieties such as “San Miguel Creole French” – a variety spoken in Panama that is traceable to St. Lucian laborers who migrated there in the mid-nineteenth century, and that was reported in 1999 to have only three remaining speakers (www.ethnologue.org, accessed December 2004).
ing and interesting way of posing the question is, What part? How big a part, how important a part? Here again, knotty questions quickly proliferate. When the issue is language endangerment, are all languages really to be regarded as equal? Is the “death” of a century-old pidgin such as Russenorsk as much of a loss to the world’s linguistic diversity as the death of a Native American language, for example? What about cases of decreolization? Do we regard the gradual loss of a creole’s basilectal forms and features due to sustained contact with its lexifier in the same way that we regard the erosion of inflectional morphology in an Amazonian language as its speakers increasingly shift to Portuguese or Spanish?

Questions such as these may be awkward ones to which there are no simple answers; but they are surely worth asking. In order to address such questions meaningfully, it is necessary to consider at least briefly the metaphorical discourses through which many of them are formulated, and which set the tone (if not also the terms) of ensuing discussions.

Drawing analogies between endangered languages and endangered biological species is a tempting and common tactic, used carefully and thoughtfully by some, more casually and carelessly by many others. Various commentators have considered the strengths and weaknesses of such analogies, and there is no need to delve deeply into the matter here. It is worthwhile, however, to consider one particular aspect of these analogies with specific regard to endangered contact languages. Clearly, certain endangered biological species, characterized by Errington (2003:724) as “charismatic megafauna (pandas, whales, and so on),” receive far greater attention, public expressions of valorization, and funded intervention than others. Taking up the same theme, Mühlhäusler (2003:243) suggests that the linguistic equivalents of these charismatic megafauna are “the languages of a small number of tribal people living away from the centres of technological and social change.” He goes on to suggest that a rather rapid and ineffectual “moral discourse” (comparable to pseudo-environmentalist “Greenspeak”) has become “clearly dominant” over more rigorous scientific and economic discourses.

Among the world’s endangered languages, endangered contact languages are sorely lacking in the sort of “charisma” alluded to by Errington and Mühlhäusler – so much so that they often seem to be virtually invisible. Consequently, the use of language-as-biological-species metaphors may be especially problematic, and may present special pitfalls, where contact languages are concerned. Be they biological species or human communities, small, powerless groups that appear to have nothing to offer to larger, more powerful groups –
or that are perceived as presenting some obstacle or challenge to the hegemony of such groups (as when a creole language is regarded as an impediment to formal education in the standard-official language) – tend to be ignored and neglected at best, or at worst, forcefully and systematically eradicated.

Some recent critiques of language endangerment discourses remind us that the status of these languages cannot be separated from the status (social, political, economic) of their speakers. Although this is hardly a new insight, many of its implications remain to be explored. Ecological perspectives such as those articulated by Mühlhäusler (1996) and Mufwene (2001) have yielded some particularly promising lines of inquiry. Viewed from an ecological perspective (which may, but need not, involve building on a biological species metaphor; see Mufwene [2001]), the overarching question that has been posed here – What is there to lose? – takes on new dimensions and subtleties. Significantly, it also casts new light on a broad distinction between pidgins and all other types of contact languages that has been suggested by ethnographic and other socially oriented perspectives.

With regard to pidgins, the answer to the question “What is there to lose?” may at first seem to be, “Not much.” After all, it is the nature of pidgins not to outlive their usefulness, as it were; they tend to be ephemeral, lasting only as long as, and developing only to the extent to which, they are needed to facilitate some fairly basic level of communication within a specific domain of activity (which itself may be relatively ephemeral). Several well-attested pidgins are known to have become “extinct” over the years, such as Russenorsk, Pidgin Basque, Chinese Pidgin Russian, and Vietnamese Pidgin French; it is unlikely that anyone mourned their passing any more than the dissolution or disruption of the historically specific configurations of social relations that gave rise to them and for a time sustained them.

But as ecological perspectives emphasize, every language is part of a system that is homeostatic yet ceaselessly dynamic, complexly integrated yet fundamentally open-ended: that is, an ecology. The demise of a language is bound to have repercussions throughout such a system, and may well disrupt its equilibrium, either temporarily or permanently (in which case the system becomes subject to disintegration). As Mühlhäusler (2003:241) notes, “What is at risk are not individual languages but the complex ecological support system that sustains linguistic diversity.” The quasi-Darwinian assumption (sometimes encountered in ecological and political economic models alike) that languages are always in competition for dominance, and that an ecology of language is ultimately reducible to struggles between dominant and dominated groups,
“under-emphasizes the degree of cooperation and interdependencies between languages as well as the complex layers of language ecologies with local vernaculars, regional and inter-village lingua francas and Pidgins that have long sustained structured diversity” (Mühlhäusler 2003:240). Mühlhäusler goes on to explain that contact languages in many cases have had key roles in maintaining the equilibrium of linguistic diversity, thereby helping to perpetuate it:10

[S]ustained linguistic diversity in the past included a range of solutions to intergroup communication, such as institutionalized multilingualism or the presence of Pidgins and lingua francas as Drechsel (1997) has demonstrated for the Mobilian language of the United States. It was the ability of speakers to communicate in other languages in particular Pidgins [sic] that helped them shield their own small languages against larger neighbouring ones.

(Mühlhäusler 2003:242)

As this suggests, the ecological role of a pidgin may be crucial and should not be underestimated – even in cases where those who speak the language may seem to have little investment in it or allegiance to it. The decline of a pidgin may be only the beginning of a systemic perturbation with far-reaching consequences for both linguistic and sociocultural diversity.

Whatever their potential ecological significance, pidgins, as auxiliary or vehicular languages, are no one’s primary language of identity – no one’s primary medium of sentiment and self-expression. In contrast, creoles and other contact languages (bilingual mixed languages, intertwined languages, semi-creoles or partially restructured varieties, indigenized varieties) typically are quite central to the identity and self-expression of their speakers. Some contact languages (e.g. Media Lengua, Anglo-Romani, Michif) seem to have emerged for precisely these reasons: as a means of constituting and asserting, and/or shoring up and maintaining, a particular group’s sense of its own identity, community, and ethnic or cultural distinctiveness. Similarly, in recent debates over the definition and application of the term creole, various commentators have concluded that one of the major distinguishing features of a creole – for some, the chief defining feature – is that, unlike a pidgin, it is the primary language of

10. This is not always the case, however; depending on the circumstances under which they enter into local ecologies of language, contact languages can also be disruptive and detrimental to linguistic diversity (as Mühlhäusler acknowledges, and as he has demonstrated in his own work in Pacific contexts [e.g. Mühlhäusler 1996; cf. Kulick 1992, Besnier 2004]).
some community of speakers (Jourdan 1991), and hence is likely to be their language of ethnic identity (Garrett 2004, Jourdan 1991).\footnote{Cf. Mufwene (2001:106–125), whose concern is not how creoles are to be distinguished from pidgins, but how, historically, they have been distinguished from other vernacular varieties of their lexifiers (and thus defined as creoles): “The main implicit criterion, which is embarrassing for linguistics but has not been discussed, is the ethnicity of their speakers” (2001:xiii).}

So aside from ecological considerations of the kind discussed above, in the case of creoles and other non-pidgin contact languages there tends to be a keener sense, on the part of individuals as well as whole communities, that there is in fact a great deal to lose – or at the very least, there tends to be greater receptivity to such an idea, and even this can provide a crucial starting point for language advocates and activists. (However important pidgins might be shown to be in ecological terms, it is rather more difficult to imagine a successful movement to preserve or revitalize a pidgin.) When a creole or other non-pidgin contact language is endangered, there is an attendant danger that an already marginalized people, whose claims to a distinctive cultural, ethnic, and/or national identity may be tenuous at best, stands to lose a crucial foundation, a “valid symbolic substrate” (Errington 2003:730), for those very claims. To take a broader view, also at stake in each case is a unique, ever-evolving record of a unique episode of human experience. The relative brevity and recency of such episodes hardly diminish their significance.\footnote{For that matter, contact languages may be less exceptional in these regards than is commonly thought. As Hill (2002:128) notes, “[L]anguages’ and their ‘dialects’ are, in many cases, very recent historical artifacts.”}

What is to be done?

A final, special consideration for those who study contact languages, and who care about the people who speak them, is that to allow their endangerment to go unnoticed and unremarked is to be tacitly complicit in perpetuating the
Short note

kinds of structural and symbolic violence that were key factors in the emergence of so many of these languages – and that in all too many cases continue to confront their speakers, in one form or another, on a daily basis. At the same time, however, we must be both mindful and respectful of the fact that such conditions may be precisely what speakers are coping with as they shift (intentionally or not) from these languages to others that seem to offer possibilities of social and economic advancement. The inhumane and degrading circumstances under which many contact languages emerged, and that continue to reverberate in the daily lives of their speakers, are the source of a profound ambivalence that in many communities would tend to undermine even the most heroic locally initiated efforts to “preserve” or “revitalize” these languages.

Ultimately, as this suggests, decisions as to whether or not such efforts are desirable and worthwhile must be made by individuals and communities at the local level. Contact language scholars who are themselves native speakers and/or members of the communities in which they carry out their research may be especially well positioned to contribute to these decision-making processes, and to lead or participate in subsequent programs of action. But those of us who are only sojourners or peripheral participants in these communities surely have something to offer as well. As Hill (2002:128–129) suggests, advocates for endangered languages need to find ways of “helping community activists to rally people in endangered-language communities to defend and reclaim their languages while simultaneously attracting resources from dominant communities.” At the very least, our work can help reveal and demystify the processes of symbolic domination (Bourdieu 1991), both historical and contemporary, whereby these languages have come to be endangered, thus providing local leaders with information that can help them to devise maximally pragmatic, strategically targeted programs of action. Just as important, we can expand our longstanding scholarly commitments to fostering awareness and recognition of these languages and their speakers by staking out a place for them in currently ongoing discussions of language endangerment. By doing so, we can help ensure that they receive the attention of governments, non-governmental organizations, philanthropic foundations, and other institutions – which in turn may be able to provide some of the protections, recognition, funding, and material resources that all speakers of endangered languages so vitally need in order to make unfettered, well-informed decisions, and to act on those decisions.
References


