“Expert Rhetorics” in Advocacy for Endangered Languages: Who Is Listening, and What Do They Hear?

During the last decade, many linguists and linguistic anthropologists have participated in a campaign of advocacy on behalf of endangered languages. Robins and Uhlenbeck (1992), Hale et al. (1992), Nettle and Romaine (2000), and Crystal (2000) are among many examples of a literature aimed at a wide audience that includes scholars, students, and community members. The goal of this campaign is to recruit scholars to efforts at documentation and development; to increase general public understanding of language endangerment; to attract funds in support of efforts by communities to reclaim, maintain, and develop their heritage languages; and to assist communities in refining these efforts. In some ways, the campaign has been successful. The most important media discuss the issue from time to time, small grant funds to support community efforts have been developed, and scholarly interest in documenting endangered languages has certainly increased. The present article, however, is not about these successes. Instead, it critiques ways in which linguists and anthropologists may unwittingly undermine their own vigorous advocacy of endangered languages by a failure to think carefully about the multiple audiences who may hear and read advocacy rhetoric.

Community language workers, speakers, and other members of local groups are both participants and overhearers in a global conversation about language endangerment in which the voices of academics and policymakers are especially prominent. How might this global conversation resonate for members of communities that are custodians of endangered languages—communities that are themselves a diverse audience? Do they find it empowering and encouraging, unintelligible and alienating, or something in between? Can they borrow from it to conduct their own advocacy, or do they prefer to use quite different discourses? What is needed is fieldwork that explores these questions specifically. In this article, I develop some questions that such work might take up by examining some of the discursive practices of the global
conversation, focusing especially on some rhetorical themes used by academics in their position as "experts."

Cynics argue that one goal of endangered-language advocacy by academic experts is to protect their jobs. Except in the very general sense that any advocacy of a human value in a capitalist economy must have such a function (after all, priests and human-rights activists collect salaries too), this criticism seems to me to be an empty one. While I challenge here the utility of certain themes in the rhetoric of endangered-language advocacy, I reject absolutely accusations that any of the scholars whose works I cite below approach this advocacy out of cynical self-interest. Those whom I know personally are people of absolute good will, who believe deeply in what they are saying and doing, and who are very unlikely to profit by working on endangered languages. All have selflessly contributed uncompensated time and even funds from their own household budgets to continue their work and to assist communities and speakers. Indeed, work on endangered languages is hardly the way to advance an academic career. At least in the United States, most universities give very little attention to community service work. Grants for work on endangered languages are tiny and often do not carry the indirect cost returns so desired by university administrators. Communities where endangered languages are spoken often are opposed to the publication of research; I personally know of several cases in which the careers of young linguists have been impeded because they followed community desires about delaying or suspending publication. Finally, I have in my own writing and public speaking repeatedly used locutions identical to those that I quote below, and I intend this article in part as an exercise in self-criticism. If I use examples from my own work only infrequently, it is because I have not published as extensively on language endangerment as have many other scholars.

Three of the themes that are ubiquitous in expert rhetoric on language endangerment may inadvertently undermine its goals of advocacy. These themes are compelling for members of dominant-language communities among whom "experts" propagandize for political and financial support. But they may have unfortunate entailments that go unnoticed by linguists and their target audiences of policymakers and funding agencies, yet distress and alienate speakers and members of their communities and amplify their distrust of linguists. The three themes are "scene-setting" elements in the literature of endangered-language advocacy. They appear in introductions and conclusions, on dust jackets, in publishers' blurbs, and in media sound bites. The first is the theme of universal ownership, the assertion that endangered languages in some sense "belong" to everyone in the world. The second is the theme of hyperbolic valorization, expressed through locutions like "Endangered languages are priceless treasures." The third is the theme of enumeration, which attempts to create a sense of crisis by the compilation and recitation of alarming statistics, such as those that show that over half of the world's languages are endangered, or that some language has only three remaining speakers.

The theme of universal ownership specifically alienates endangered languages from their speakers and other members of communities in which the languages are spoken. The discourse of hyperbolic valorization converts endangered languages into objects more suitable for preservation in museums patronized by exceptionally discerning elites than for ordinary use in everyday life by imperfect human beings. The theme of enumeration, which censuses endangered languages and their speakers, expresses a form of power that may amplify the alienation of endangered languages from the
domain of quotidian practice of those who use them to the domain of esoteric expert knowledge.

I note that I have not found these themes in works aimed directly at communities and intended to be of immediate practical assistance, such as Fishman (1991) and its successor volume Fishman (2001), or in Hinton's (2001) introductory essay to Hinton and Hale (2001). I assume that the authors judge that the intended audiences for these works do not need the same kind of persuasion of the worth of their languages or of the urgency of the task of revitalization as do the more general audience for the works cited below.

**Universal Ownership**

The theme of universal ownership is found in statements that endangered languages belong to everyone in the world and especially to the target audiences for advocacy, who must be convinced that they "possess" this particular form of wealth and are somehow responsible for it. An example is found in one of the earliest collections on language endangerment aimed at policymakers, where Zepeda and Hill refer to the diversity of languages in indigenous North America as "one of the great treasures of humanity" (1992:135; emphasis added). A variant of this locution is "the world's languages" (as found, for instance, in the title of Nettle and Romaine 2000). Hinton concludes the introduction to her widely praised popular book on California Indian languages as follows: "I seek to bring to the reader a sense of urgency about the impending loss of our great linguistic treasure, and a sense of the priceless value the languages have, not only to the first Californians and to linguists, but to all of us" (1994:19). Crystal writes that when endangered languages are no longer spoken, "Everyone should be concerned, because it is everyone's loss" (2000:ix). This kind of language is found as well in international documents; for instance, the preamble to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of 1992 states, "The protection of the historic regional or minority languages of Europe ... contributes to the maintenance and development of Europe's cultural wealth and traditions" (1995:383).

Linguists subscribe to a version of this theme for a technical reason with which I concur. As Hinton (2001) points out, we should understand human knowledge as a project to which all peoples have contributed, thereby countering the widely held idea that contributions to human knowledge are made only by Western elites. If we believe this, and if, as most linguists agree, "the loss of language is part of the loss of ... knowledge systems," then "the world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used" (Hinton 2001:5; emphasis added). Furthermore, for many audiences of nonlinguists, this theme works well. It lends immediacy to requests for funds and policy initiatives by implying that agencies and foundations should care for endangered languages in the same way that they care for their own possessions. The theme of universal ownership is rooted in several cultural logics that are widely shared by this audience. They are likely to believe that there exists a "common humanity" with a single shared moral significance, perhaps as creatures of the creator, or descendants of Adam, or as individuals endowed with inalienable rights. They are likely to believe in the existence of a single human species defined by the capacity for modern human language. The theme of universal ownership is also rooted in an ecological and environmentalist logic,
that the world consists of a single web of complexity that is the foundation for human and planetary survival, and that pulling on any thread—a single endangered species or language—may collapse the whole. Finally, the theme is rooted in a logic in which human beings can think of dimensions of the natural and cultural world as resources, to which they are related through stewardship and ownership. This last is, of course, one of the foundational logics that has driven colonialist and neocolonialist projects during the last two centuries.

Many members of communities that have the first claim on endangered languages may not share these logics or foundational propositions. For them, it may make little sense to say that a language “belongs” to someone who has no intention of learning it, has never heard it, and has never known any of its speakers. It is illogical in many communities to say that a language belongs to someone who has no tie to the language by virtue of those mediating qualities that often yield a claim on a language in the indigenous world, such as territory of birth or links of kinship. Thus a statement that an endangered language belongs to everybody rather than specifically to its speakers and their relatives and neighbors can easily be heard not as an expression of a universal human value, but as a threat to expropriate a resource. The specific history of rhetorics of universal ownership in the last century certainly supports such an understanding. In the United States, for instance, lands that “belong” to everybody, such as national parks and monuments, are used by members of dominant groups for projects that are uniquely theirs, such as camping, hiking, or hunting and fishing for sport in designated seasons. These lands are “protected” in such a way that they are specifically not usable by many members of indigenous communities for their own purposes, such as quarrying useful stone, collecting wild plants, cutting firewood, or fishing and hunting for subsistence. There is hardly an indigenous community in the world that is not actively combating expropriation of lands and resources done in the name of universal or national ownership.

If we examine what is written and said about endangered languages by speakers and others who are based in local communities, we do not encounter statements about universal ownership. Such speakers do use the language of possession: They speak of “my language” and “our language.” But they do not, in the presence of interested outsiders, refer to their way of speaking as “your language too!” Indeed, I have been informed by a community member trying to hurry me along in getting my field notes on Cupéno in shape for electronic sharing, that “You (JHH) have our language.” When the publication of the Hopi Dictionary (Hopi Dictionary Project 1998) was announced by the University of Arizona Press, officers of the Hopi Tribe were extremely concerned that the publication of the dictionary would put Hopi in the public domain and reduce the tribe’s control over the language. They did not want the publisher to profit from the sale of the language and wished to control the copyright of the dictionary (K. Hill 2002). Yet another example comes from an anecdote that has circulated for many years in the Southwest (I believe the anecdote to be true. It has a specific provenance, but I leave this out partly because I know that many members of the community would never have said such a thing, and partly because it could easily have happened in almost any indigenous community in the Americas.) A linguist who had learned to speak an indigenous language was conversing in it on the sidelines at a dance. He was assaulted by a drunken local man who threatened him with a knife, saying, “You white people have stolen every single thing we ever had, and now you’re stealing our language.”
These anecdotes capture a theme of fear of loss of control over resources and more specifically a theme of theft that is widespread in communities where endangered languages are spoken. Another claim that is beginning to be used by community-level language workers (and was used by officers of the Hopi Tribe in the dictionary publication case mentioned above) is the idea that endangered languages constitute "intellectual property." The idea of intellectual property suggests that the knowledge that makes biological, cultural, or linguistic resources intelligible is a good held in specific communities who should be able to control it and request compensation if permission is given to outsiders to use or reproduce it. The discourse of local control, the discourse of theft, and the discourse of intellectual property all contradict the theme of universal ownership.

**Hyperbolic Valorization**

In attempting to raise public consciousness about language endangerment, linguists have argued that even small local languages with little or no written tradition are an important "resource"; they have "value." Endangered languages, then, constitute a form of "wealth." Thus, Harmon (1995), comparing biological diversity and linguistic diversity, speaks of "biological and cultural wealth," where linguistic diversity is his central example of "cultural wealth." Similarly, Hale observes that "linguistic and cultural diversity is the enabling condition for the production of intellectual wealth of all kinds and in all fields" (1998:193).

Linguists (and biologists like Harmon) keep repeating this theme because, in fact, it is very difficult to convince most ordinary people that it is true. Within living memory, in all except the most specialized scholarly circles, the languages that are today endangered were universally viewed as barbarous and deficient. Such a view was shared even by some speakers. Dorian has summarized the ideological complex that yields this view: an "ideology of contempt" (Grillo 1989) wherein a language is despised by association with a stigmatized subordinate population, based on "ignorance about the complexity and expressivity of indigenous languages, ... belief in linguistic social Darwinism, and ... belief in the onerousness of bi- or multilingualism" (Dorian 1998:12). Furthermore, even most speakers of endangered languages share a commonsense understanding that only major regional and world languages have linguistic "value"—the direct convertibility of the ability to speak them into income in a wide range of markets. This is one source of the negative entailments of the theme of value. This commonsense (and largely correct) view that endangered languages do not have linguistic value in the ordinary sense implies that the value that is referred to in the literature of endangered-language advocacy must be some other kind, beyond the ordinary. This implication, and its explicit formulation in discourse, is a second source of the entailments, of "value."

Given public resistance to messages about the worth of endangered languages in any sense at all, the rhetoric used by advocates for the protection and development of local languages understandably tends to err on the side of hyperbole. Perhaps the most important key terms in the theme of hyperbolic valorization of endangered languages are the words *treasure* and *priceless*. Hale speaks of "human treasure" (1992:40). Hinton calls the endangered languages of indigenous California "our great cultural treasure" (1994:19)—the precise range of inclusion of our seems to be all Californians (see the section above on the theme of universal ownership). She concludes
with the following language: “I seek to bring to the reader a sense of urgency about the impending loss of our great linguistic treasure, and a sense of the priceless value the languages have” (1994:19). Likewise, Zepeda and Hill refer to the diversity of languages in indigenous North America as “one of the great treasures of humanity” (1992:135). And Hale states that “the loss of local languages ... has meant irretrievable loss of diverse and interesting intellectual wealth, the priceless products of human mental industry” (1992:36).

References to linguistic value as “treasure” emanate from an apparently quite widespread and ancient tradition of economic metaphors in speaking of language. Thus, Coulmas (1992:1) notes a proverb attributed to King Solomon, “The tongue of the just is as choice silver” (Proverbs 10:20). The current wave of economic metaphorizing is additionally grounded in a literal economic effort to establish new markets, not only in the extended sense advanced by Bourdieu (1982), but in the narrow sense of providing salaried positions for speakers of endangered languages. Earlier waves of hyperbole that exploited the theme of treasure occurred in similar contexts, where the value of the languages thus characterized was contested. Secondary sources I have examined reveal many cases from the period of the emergence of the Western European vernaculars as written languages replacing Latin as the “marketable” tongues. For instance, the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations cites a few illustrative lines from Samuel Daniel’s (1562–1619) Musophilus:

And who, in time, knows whither we may vent /The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores /This gain of our best glory shall be sent, /T’enrich unknowing nations with our stores? What worlds in th’yet unformed Occident /May come refin’d with th’accents that are ours?[Knowles 1999]

Contemporary discourse about “priceless linguistic treasure” may entail a socio-economy (Puckett 2000) that resembles the archaic economies proposed by Polanyi (1957). In “archaic economies” the exchange of goods is stratified; goods are exchangeable for other goods only within their specific sphere, with very limited convertibility under restricted circumstances. Each sphere is often associated with a particular social status. In the same way, the hyperbolic valorization of endangered languages effects a conversion of such languages into elite goods in a stratified linguistic economy. That is, the entailments of expressions like “priceless treasure” go beyond mere commodification to turn endangered languages into a special kind of symbolic capital that is exchanged within a sphere in which only certain kinds of people can participate. Endangered languages thus become like valuables of very low convertibility exchanged by high-status participants in “archaic economies,” such as the spondylus-shell bracelets exchanged in the Trobriand kula ring or the brass rods of the Tiv, liquid only in the payment of bridewealth. Rhydwen (1995) has suggested the term boutique languages to characterize such codes because they are difficult of access and valued for their uniqueness, which can enhance the cultural repertoires of select consumers. This kind of connoisseurship can be read into statements like one written by Mithun: “There is not a language in North America that fails to offer breathtakingly beautiful intricacy. For descendants of speakers to discover this beauty can profoundly enrich their lives, much like the discovery of music, literature, or art, if not more” (1998:189). Mithun’s statement, with which I entirely agree, acquires its tone of connoisseurship partly because of its intertextual association
with the theme of hyperbolic valorization. Our use of this theme as academic experts thus gives a problematic shade to other statements that might be in themselves useful and positive.

The word priceless, common in the rhetoric of endangered-language advocacy, explicitly removes the form of wealth represented in indigenous linguistic diversity from the normal spheres of exchange into some higher sphere. The term in English encompasses two kinds of goods. First are values such as familial love or spiritual tranquility that are not available for purchase in the market. But the term also is used frequently about purchasable goods—such as Old Master paintings and important gems—that in fact have prices, but of such exorbitance that they can be paid only by persons and institutions of great wealth.

Although a complete account of the semantic field accessed by treasure is beyond the scope of this article, a survey of the citations in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* suggests some important dimensions. First, treasure implies wealth in precious metals and jewels, as opposed to accumulations of everyday items. Treasure is often hidden, part of some miser's hoard that only a careful searcher will find. Perhaps deriving from the notion of hidden treasure is the idea that many things that appear not to be worth much—for instance, love, friendship, or salvation—are in fact treasure, equivalent to a hoard of gold and silver coins. The most famous expression of this idea appears in the Gospel of Saint Matthew (6:19), where the faithful are urged to store up treasure, not on earth, where it may rust away or be stolen, but in heaven.

The idea that small local languages are treasures clearly entails this tradition of reference to hidden wealth that can be recognized and found only by people who are exceptionally discerning. The entailment that treasure is hidden can be found explicitly developed in statements such as one by Mithun, who observes, “Many modern residents of North America are themselves unaware of the phenomenally rich linguistic diversity indigenous to their continent” (Mithun 1998:163). Hale also develops this entailment, remarking that the “cultural and intellectual wealth” of language diversity that existed prior to the colonial period “was lost utterly and without being noticed, primarily because it was mental wealth, appreciable only through the language which was lost with it. Only by accident do we know the extent of the loss” (1998:193).

In summary, the language of hyperbolic valorization yields an entailment that local languages are so valuable as not to have a place in everyday markets (they are “priceless”) and of a type of value likely to be recognized only by those of cultivated discernment. Thus this rhetoric removes endangered languages from the realm of the quotidian and places them in a highly restricted sphere of exchange, in the kind of rarefied linguistic marketplace that may be seen by communities of speakers as a space where tokens composed by experts are exchanged for a kind of wealth that is inaccessible to ordinary speakers. Such an arena may seem to have little to do with the linguistic marketplace where everyday people negotiate with one another about everyday matters in the fleeting signals of the spoken language, which, unlike the enduring golden hoard, is in constant change.

**How Do Speakers Talk about Value?**

Do we find the discourse of hyperbolic valorization in communities where endangered languages are spoken? There seem to be some examples. For instance, Moore
(1988) reports that some of the last speakers of Wasco-Wishram consider it to be the equivalent of the important valuables once held by nobles. Meek (2001) found that many speakers of Kaska considered it to be a language of special dignity, such that it was more appropriate for use by elders than by youth. In order to explore this question in yet another context, I turned to the data from my fieldwork among speakers of Mexicano (Nahuatl) on the Malinche Volcano in central Mexico, conducted from 1974 to roughly 1983. In this context, language shift was well advanced in some towns, but not in others, and there was not a widespread sense among speakers or their neighbors that the language was "endangered."

In a sociolinguistic interview (Hill and Hill 1986) speakers were asked whether they believed that Mexicano was "needed" (moneztarihui), a context where a rhetoric about the "worth" of the language could have appeared. A variety of themes appeared in their responses. These included patriotic representations of Mexicano as essential in a Mexican nation, religious discourses representing Mexicano as God's will, a discourse of inherited essence ("Well, of course we speak it. That is how we grew up, with our mother and father speaking it to us"), and the discourse of nostalgia and its counterdiscourse (J. Hill 1998). A number of speakers observed that Spanish was the language of most workplaces, so it was "needed" to get a good job, while Mexicano was the language through which local community resources are pursued within systems of reciprocity and redistribution. But only six speakers out of 90 used metaphors that might be thought of as economic in speaking of the Mexicano language itself. In four of these cases, the key term was herencia 'inheritance'. It is not clear that this usage is always economic, since S83, a sometime factory worker, used herencia to enlarge on a statement that Mexicano was "that remembrance from our grandfathers" (non recuerdo den tocohcoltzitzihuan) for which one should not be ungrateful. The term recuerdo can encompass inexpensive souvenirs, photographs, or small heirloom items such as clocks, and obviously does not necessarily imply monetary wealth. S18, a priest; S56, a wealthy farmer; and S76, a shepherd also used the term herencia. One speaker, S26, actually called Mexicano "a treasure" (ce: tesoro) and continued with clear economic language: A person who spoke only one language (Spanish), he said, "is no longer valuable ... he no longer has value" (acmo valerihui ... acmo cpia ni:valor). (Note that valerihui can be used to ask a price: Quexquich valerihui? 'How much does it cost?') Of the six speakers who may have been using economic metaphors, three (S18, S26, and S56) were conspicuously well-off and may be thought of as having "bought into" the practices and rhetorics of capitalist endeavor. S26, the speaker who characterized the language as a tesoro, is an excellent broad-honorific (Hill and Hill 1986) speaker. He is also probably the most alienated from his community of anyone we met. He lived in the central barrio of the town of San Pablo del Monte—that is, in the least Mexicano section of a town that as a whole was in the late stages of language shift. He was a police officer in the city of Puebla, and he was (uniquely in our sample) a Protestant. Thus, he had no occasion to speak Mexicano in ritual contexts—since these are organized locally within an idiom of Catholicism, which he did not practice. For him, then, Mexicano may truly have achieved the status of a "boutique language." Certainly the idea of "treasure" (ce: tesoro) must have held for him an aura of secrecy and exclusivity. He almost certainly knew of local tales about "treasure." In his community of San Pablo del Monte and in other Malinche towns, it is widely believed that there is tesoro of a literal kind, hidden in caves in the mountain, that can be sought
with shovels and metal detectors. Some people believe that these treasure-filled caves belong to the Malinche herself, who is said to lure men into the depths of the mountain, never to return, with tales of the wealth to be found in her hidden cellars. S26, as a Bible-reading Protestant, also almost certainly knew the New Testament references to treasure laid up in heaven.

In summary, variants on the theme of hyperbolic valorization appear in indigenous communities. However, the few anecdotes where I have found them attested suggest that they are likely to appear in late stages of language shift, in contexts in which the relationship of speakers to a language is no longer a matter of quotidian practice. In this distance from the practical use of language, members of such communities may be rather like endangered-language “experts,” who seldom have an opportunity to use the language, or use it only on special occasions where the use of the language is highly marked.

Enumeration

An important technique in the rhetoric of advocacy for endangered languages is to present frightening statistics about the large number of languages spoken in the world today and the small number likely to survive at some time in the near future. Calls for more accurate enumeration of languages and their speakers in order to plan more precisely for action have been made by professional societies such as the Linguistic Society of America as well as by governmental entities such as UNESCO. The statistics assembled by Krauss (1992), which suggest that only 10 percent of the approximately 6,000 languages spoken today are likely to survive into the end of the next century, are a much-cited example. Krauss’s statistics are quoted in virtually every book, scholarly essay, and newspaper article on language endangerment published since their appearance. They are intended as calls to action: Like other population statistics on rates of infant death, cancer, rape, and murder, these numbers are advanced because they are thought to be moving and horrifying and thus are believed to be able to mobilize activists to reverse the trends that they suggest.

The publication of such statistics clearly has compelling force for some audiences that are targets of endangered-language advocacy. However, like the themes of universal ownership and hyperbolic valorization, the theme of enumeration includes some negative entailments. To census is an important gesture of power. Cohn points out that “the enumerative modality,” the expression of knowledge as “a vast collection of numbers,” is one of the major forms of knowledge of colonial regimes (1996:8). Porter observes that by enumeration “people are made governable; they display what Foucault called governmentality. Numbers create and can be compared with norms, which are among the gentlest and yet most persuasive forms of power in modern democracies” (1995:45). This implicit message of power entailed by the enumeration of languages and speakers contradicts the celebration of the local and the support of the oppressed that is the explicit goal of endangered-language advocacy. Furthermore, this implicit message is heard clearly by members of local communities, who, knowing the ways that numbers can be and have been held against them, may fear and resent it.

To endow languages with the quality of being enumerable depends on an assumption of essentialization and individualization of a language as a sort of unit, which contradicts the insight that the array of “languages” that we currently recognize—even
those that do not, in the immortal expression of Max Weinreich, have "armies and navies," are very much the product of the rise of European nation-states and the colonial regimes that they imposed on the world (cf. Gal and Irvine 1995, 2000; Harries 1988; Mühlhäusler 1996).

Mühlhäusler (1996) has been one of the most eloquent critics of enumeration. Discussing language endangerment in Oceania, he suggests, "The very view that languages can be counted and named may be part of the disease that has affected the linguistic ecology of the Pacific" (1996:5). He demonstrates that arbitrary points on an ineluctable dialect chain were often singled out and designated as "languages" because "some important outsider settled there" (1996:6)—with the result that speakers at any distance from such points found themselves marginalized, speakers of "dialects."

In short, "languages" and their "dialects" are, in many cases, very recent historical artifacts. Furthermore, new claims of linguistic autonomy are constantly emerging. It is not possible to scientifically determine the number of languages in the world, and, of course, to even make the attempt requires an ideology that permits their enumeration. We might argue that the sort of statistics compiled by, for instance, the Ethnologue (Grimes and Grimes 2002), are "good enough" for our purposes. However, such a subtlety is not the stuff of sound bite advocacy, where the intricacies of the world must be collapsed into nine-second black and white sketches, whether by linguists familiar with dealing with media or by journalists themselves.

The enumeration of "speakers" is just as permeated with politics as is the enumeration of languages. Contributors to Singh (1998) have pointed out the dangers of imposing a European/American (and especially a white "standard" version of American English) monolingual norm of "speakerhood" in areas of the world where many people are multilingual from earliest childhood. Students of endangered languages are all familiar with cases in which new claims of speakerhood are made by community members who are reclaiming their languages, often through heroic work with linguistic archives. Again, we might say that the estimates of speaker numbers found in sources like the Ethnologue are "good enough": a claim like "only five elderly speakers of language X remain" can justify the derived claim, "documentation of the language of this community should be given the highest priority for funding." However, such a claim may be heard as dismissive and insulting by members of younger generations in the community who make claims of speakerhood in some form. Thus there is a genuine conflict between the desire of linguists and anthropologists to invoke what Porter (1995) calls "trust in numbers" in support of the cause of combating language endangerment and our on-the-ground knowledge of the problematic nature of our analytic units, to say nothing of our understanding of the dangers of enumeration as a gesture of power that contradicts our goals.

Conclusion

I have pointed out that three important themes in the rhetoric of advocacy for endangered languages have entailments that may be problematic for communities of speakers. However, these themes have engaged the attention of journalists and policymakers. Can endangered-language advocates modify their rhetoric in such a way as to balance between the two audiences, helping community activists to rally people in endangered-language communities to defend and reclaim their languages while
simultaneously attracting resources from dominant communities? I believe that we need to explore alternatives to the themes I critiqued above. One source of alternatives should be the custodians of endangered languages in local communities. An ethnographic task for linguists and linguistic anthropologists should be to collaborate with members of communities to identify rhetorics that emanate from and make sense in terms of community concerns, yet that may be effective with the broader community of funders and policymakers. Pending such work, the suggestions I make here are obviously inadequate, but perhaps will suggest some directions.

What might replace the theme of universal ownership? One solution might be to shift from the ideas of “ownership” and “belonging” to other rhetorics of universalism. For instance, we might develop a theme derived from the rhetoric of humane concern. When a quality of a person or group as intimate as a language is lost, there is suffering, and this suffering must concern us all, because as human beings we are all the same. Fishman, characterizing the position of Herder, uses a subtle humanistic language that exalts the celebration of the local as a contribution to universal human freedom:

The entire world needs a diversity of ethnolinguistic entities for its own salvation, for its greater creativity, for the more certain solution of human problems, for the constant rehumanization of humanity in the face of materialism, for fostering greater esthetic, intellectual, and emotional capacities for humanity as a whole, indeed, for arriving at a higher state of human functioning. [Fishman 1982:6–7]

In the case of hyperbolic valorization, we might avoid talk of “price,” “wealth,” and “treasure” and instead talk about human intellectual accomplishment, about the “genius” visible in the thought of ordinary people. Sources for this type of hyperbole might be found, for instance, in some of the early work on language acquisition in generative grammar. Chomsky’s eloquent insistence that every child exhibits a capacity for language beyond the competence of science to describe was, I believe, of enormous use in combating the deficit theories that were used in the 1950s and 1960s to explain the problems of children who spoke vernacular versions of national languages. Certainly there is considerable precedent for this sort of discourse once we get past the sound bite hyperbole of the book jackets; Hinton (1994) is a magnificent celebration of the ingenuity and complexity of California languages that is much appreciated by community members. So part of the solution is simply to turn what we say inside out and derive our sound bites from the more nuanced discussions of the fascinating properties of endangered languages that can be found once we leaf past the hyperbole of our introductory passages. And it would be especially useful to work with speakers to show how these properties capture unique local understandings of the world that are deeply embedded in a way of life (as is accomplished, for instance, in Woodbury’s [1993] well-known paper on Central Alaskan Yupik directional and locational formations).

I do not think that we can eliminate the theme of enumeration entirely. Granting agencies, for instance, will continue to insist on quantitative information, and to the degree that we try to recruit resources from international agencies, statistics like those compiled by Krauss (1992) or the Ethnologue are essential tools. I would argue, however, that at the sound bite level we might wish to emphasize not the numbers, but the human specifics of endangered-language communities. A good example is
found in the first chapter of Nettle and Romaine (2000), which opens with a series of poignant obituaries in which individual speakers are named and only later turns to broader statistical questions. Furthermore, we need to emphasize the many qualities besides numbers of speakers that individual communities may bring to the task of developing a heritage language, such as commitment and determination even on the part of those who may not have been privileged to learn the language as children, or the importance of a language that is not spoken every day to a system of worship that may be pivotal to the social health of a community.

It may be that the least dangerous ready-to-hand rhetoric for endangered-language advocacy is a rhetoric of human rights (cf. Hinton 2001:5; Skuttnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1995). The rhetoric of human rights incorporates the theme of universalism, which is useful in advocacy, but does not bring along with it the baggage of commodification entailed in the themes of universal ownership and hyperbolic valorization. It makes languages what they really are: fundamental, practical, fully embodied properties of human beings, like the capacities for love and sympathy, which also produce great beauty in our lives. It avoids characterizing them in terms of secondary properties, such as worth in a marketplace, that they may acquire in some cultural contexts but not others.

A clear and exemplary statement of rights, which implies a right to develop one’s heritage language, has been adopted by the American Anthropological Association:

> People and groups have a generic right to realize their capacity for culture, and to produce, reproduce and change the conditions and forms of their physical, personal and social existence, so long as such activities do not diminish the same capacities of others. [American Anthropological Association Committee for Human Rights 1998]

A rhetoric of human rights—in contrast to the theme of enumeration—entails an appropriate stance in opposition to oppression. Most language endangerment today is not the result of a free choice among linguistic options, but is instead the result of discrimination, of direct attack on the languages as such, as well as indirect attacks on local cultural and linguistic identities through every form of oppression and stigma, which have the aim of reducing those who have made them to deculturated and marginalized populations on the lowest rung of global hierarchies. To lend moral and material support to communities that are trying to reverse the effects of these forces is an important duty. No practical considerations suggest otherwise. As Woodbury (1993) has pointed out, the shift to the exclusive use of world and/or regional languages by these populations has generally brought no gain in symbolic capital because the varieties of languages like English, Spanish, and Russian that are spoken in marginalized groups are in turn stigmatized, just as were the tongues that have been abandoned. Since multilingualism has been amply shown to be cognitively unproblematic, there is no inherent reason that the acquisition of large-scale languages for instrumental reasons should threaten the maintenance of local languages, which can be maintained as a resource for unique identities and as a link to history. Local communities should be provided with resources and protected from oppression so that they can maintain their languages, regardless of how our scholarship may interpret the functions of linguistic diversity on a global scale. We need to develop thoughtful forms of advocacy in order to develop such resources, which
will make the global conversation in support of endangered languages fully intelligible and useful to all who participate in it.

Notes

1. I thank Elizabeth Keating and two anonymous referees for their thoughtful suggestions on the first draft of this article. The remaining infelicities are, of course, my fault.

2. The idea of intellectual property is an entirely occidental notion that has its own dangers. It is interesting, however, that some members of endangered-language communities have found it useful.

3. Of course, contemporary economies exhibit some of the same features.

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