The Politics of Language Endangerment

Barbra A. Meek

1 Introduction

In the quote above, Lisa Philips was reflecting on the contrast between the multilingual realities of First Nations peoples historically and the scholarly expectation of community monolingualism that plagues the historical record. These same expectations, grounded in a politics of domination and a discourse of modernity, continue to inflect the conceptualization of indigenous language practices, most apparently in the phrase language endangerment. The goal of this chapter is to unpack this phrase across a range of actors, discourses, and agendas. I hope to show how language endangerment is the quintessential anthropological fact, produced at the intersection[s] of cultural classification systems and a world that is dynamic and heterogeneous (Carse 2014: 391). Furthermore, like genetic facts (Marks 2012), studies of language endangerment provide anthropology with an opportunity to provoke a more nuanced conceptualization of the recursive relationship between its various dichotomies: the biological (physical/somatic) and the anthropological (discursive/ideological) (Carse 2014), or, more classically, the emotional – ethical and the scientific – analytic (cf. Friedrich 1989) – the material or physical experience and expression entwined through discourse and remembering.

Language endangerment has been a rallying phrase and a growing concern for the past few decades, alongside its counterpoint language revitalization, the response to endangerment and impending extinction. National Public Radio, the New York Times, and AOL.com have publicized stories on endangered languages in the past year or so. Panels at major conferences regularly address the issues and challenges of language endangerment (e.g. an AILA World Congress 2014 panel entitled “A world of indigenous languages: rights, access, and education,” organized by Gillian Wigglesworth and Teresa McCarty). Publications, from ethnographies (Nevins 2013a) to new journals (such as Documenting Endangered Languages) continue to find an audience. Much of the broad, popular appeal of language endangerment hinges on alignments with intersecting social justice issues, biodiversity, and human rights. Within anthropology, however, the intellectual gravitas of language endangerment remains marginal and fraught with the tensions of expectations.
As I currently reside in a department that values historical theoretical scholarship, part of language endangerment’s banality might be explained by the very real purpose and execution such investigations entail. Yet it would be remiss, if not unethical these days, to merely document and theorize the death of a language without providing some kind of support for its potential phoenix-like resurgence or for its immediate growth, with the caveat that such language agendas or projects are already underway locally. In my experience, most scholars would not even have access to an endangered variety if an individual or individuals of a language community (Silverstein 1998) were not similarly motivated to preserve, to maintain, or to revitalize the shifting practices that university scholars intend to investigate. As Granadillo and Orcutt-Gachiri note in their introduction to their edited volume on language endangerment, ‘[w]e [university scholars] provide tools for the communities but are fully aware that it is the communities’ choice whether to pursue activities to attempt to reverse language loss. We feel that communities are the only ones that can determine which path is the right one for them (2011: 12). People personally experiencing linguistic practices in shift, from a marginal to a dominant variety, may find discoursing about the situation, reflecting on their theories of language, and extrapolating from observation to patterned practice, a curiously odd response to the transformative process at hand. That is, for many affected by such drastic and rapid linguistic transformations (as implied by the label endangered language), there is an expectation that scholars (in this case, anthropologists) will provide assistance, not simply as public orators or political advocates, but as researchers who have skills that can be applied to local community projects. The expectation is that the university scholar will not only document people’s practices and beliefs for his or her own theoretical accoutrement, but that he or she will work with people to develop and innovate new practices, methods, and skills for achieving some nondisciplinary goal, perhaps even to generate new speakers (including the university expert). This expectation is in stark contrast to the expectations of the institution(s) that mediate scholarly life. As anthropologists we are expected to make new theoretical contributions, not new language lesson plans or new speakers.

Thus, the theories and models that frame language endangerment investigations are fraught with the tedium of practical concerns, such that their theoretical significance is lost amidst the tensions of expectations across those of the people experiencing the change and striving for linguistic survival, those of the people striving for scholarly success and academic recognition, and those of the various institutions striving for (financial) success and (public) recognition. They are tensions arising at the intersection of expectations grounded in different politics and different economies (moral and market, local and global, individual and institutional). Like the distinction between the biological and the anthropological, the dichotomous treatments discussed below – between real-world action and academic modeling, or entextualized material and political discourse, or speaking bodies and extrapolated grammars – are most interestingly understood in a recursive relationship, where anthropological and linguistic facts are made manifest in a cacophony of human action and expectation. This exploration of the production of anthropological and linguistic facts vis-à-vis language endangerment begins with salvage ethnography and the Americanist tradition.

2 Historical Perspectives: Salvage Ethnography and the Americanist Tradition

According to Regna Darnell, ‘[t]here is an Americanist commitment to preserving the knowledge encoded in oral traditions so that it shall not be lost from the permanent record of human achievement . . . ’ The contemporary concern over ‘endangered languages’ among linguists and anthropologists is rooted in this Americanist experience (1999: 46). Language endangerment thus
sits squarely within the Americanist tradition. Entailed as well is the practice of salvage ethnography, a practice that marks the beginning of the documentation of the end of indigenous (language) practices. While similar approaches and motivations for documentation were undertaken in other colonial contexts, the salvage approach gained disciplinary traction in North America through Franz Boas, the founder of American anthropology and its Americanist Tradition (Valentine and Darnell 1999). Americanist anthropology was assumed from the start to be a salvage operation (Fogelson 1999: 81). Raymond Fogelson traces the origin of this operation back to Thomas Jefferson and his fascination with American Indian languages (1999, 77–78). As operations of great modernist proportions, salvage efforts were instituted in order to preserve the practices, beliefs, and knowledge of the colonized populations that colonial administrators, and their governments, were intent on dominating either through assimilation or genocide. Such documentary steps also provided a way in which to count, to geographically locate, and to classify indigenous populations. It was an operation with two material endpoints: bodies and texts.

In the United States, such efforts were undertaken by the Bureau of (American) Ethnology (BAE), which in 1881 merged with the US Geological Survey. Under the direction of John Wesley Powell, the BAE’s second director, this department became the organization to carry out this national directive. Powell, an adherent of the racial–biological classification and evolutionary system of the day, used language (primarily word lists) as an instrument to identify and classify indigenous populations, along with Gallatin’s 1836 map of tribes (Powell 1880, 1991[1891]). Boas, by contrast, argued that the entire linguistic system required documentation, from sounds to texts, and that such documentation required a standard nomenclature derived from all languages, not only Indo–European varieties. To that end, he established standards for linguistic description and a nomenclature for documenting grammars (Boas 1991[1911]). The motivation for such attention to grammar was two-fold: to discover the histories of indigenous groups (migration and contact) and to reveal the complexities of indigenous languages and, by extrapolation, indigenous mental life, language being one of the most important manifestations of mental life (Boas 1991[1911]: 63). Counter to Powell and other contemporaries, Boas’ goal was to discover systems of classification based on universal units of comparison and to explain variation in relation to socio-historical context rather than some essential biological difference. However, both Powell and Boas ‘faced considerable pressures to define culture in observable, preferably materially preservable, form’ (Darnell 1999: 48) and both assumed the demise of American Indian languages and cultures (Nevins 2013a, 125–127).

Like Powell, Boas was a product of his time and his institutional environment. Having founded the first department of anthropology at Columbia University and being responsible for the training of the first generations of American anthropologists, he had his own expectations about what to preserve and how to preserve/represent the object of his preservationist attention, mediated in part by his own disciplinary training and intellectual interest. In their 1999 article, anthropologists Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman reveal the critical part Boas played ‘in determining what would be rendered as “laws and stories,” the form and content of the corpus, the discursive frames in which it would be placed, and what sorts of authority would accrue to the texts’, through an analysis of Boas’ written exchanges with George Hunt and editorial excisions of Hunt’s textual efforts (Briggs and Bauman 1999: 480; see also Bauman and Briggs 2003). In particular, they detail the ways in which Boas managed the texts of these individually collected narratives in order to represent a more globally generic Kwakiutl culture, rather than the particular circumstances of their telling and the narrators who performed them. They argue that it is in these sleights of Boas’ hand, and pen, that the construction of modernity persisted (Briggs and Bauman 1999: 481). For Boas, the authentic object for collection and preservation was not the unmodified object of original elicitation, but the unadulterated yet progressively
arranged version that would meet the expectations of its modern (English-literate), white public and naturalize the authority of the anthropologist.

Enmeshed in these early projects are the politics of the nation financing these salvage expeditions and the personal politics of individuals charged with conducting the research. Masked by the analytic (classificatory) approaches of these researchers, and the transparency of biological difference that they assumed in their enumerative and documentary efforts, the social-political complexity within and across indigenous groups became buried under the weight of modernity and its reigning voices, their own voices silenced in these acts of entextualization and enumeration.

3 Critical Topics: Language Shift, Inequality, and Voice

In the mid-twentieth century, new voices arose in the academy, articulating with the Civil Rights movements in the United States and defining linguistic anthropology as the study of language as social action. Dell Hymes, along with colleagues such as Erving Goffman, John Gumperz, and William Labov, and his then students (such as Judith Irvine, Susan Philips, Joel Sherzer, and Elinor Ochs), recognized the significance of speech in the politics of everyday life. Hymes, building off the Boasian Americanist tradition, developed the textual tradition into the field of ethnopoetics (Webster and Kroskrity 2013). This development emphasized the stylistic elements of narrative in performance, across individuals, across narrative iterations and modalities, across contexts, and so forth. It expanded the textual tradition of the Boasian school in order to encompass all possible dimensions of narrative. In this analytic expansion, Hymes was also concerned with narrative inequality (as were his influential predecessors). However, his concern with inequality drew attention to individual speakers (or narrators) and their voices. As Blommaert notes, ‘ultimately, what ethnopoetics does is to show voice, to visualize the particular ways – often deviant from hegemonic norms – in which subjects produce meaning’ (Blommaert 2009: 271). Or, as Webster and Kroskrity summarize, ‘Hymesian “voice” is both a creative and a political accomplishment’ (2013: 3).

With respect to marginalized groups, especially indigenous communities and linguistic practice in Native North America, Hymes believed ethnopoetics and anthropological research generally could, and should, provide an opportunity for voice. He also recognized the political complexity within these communities: ‘[speech communities] are found to prefer one language for a purpose as against another, to acquire some languages and give up others because of their suitability for certain purposes’. No government can afford to assume the equality of all the languages in its domain (Hymes 1996: 56). Similarly, research on language in practice often reflected this observation, documenting one particular variety at the exclusion of others, and certainly excluding the complex code-interchanges that littered the speech of multilingual communities. While recognizing this complexity, ‘... language is in large part what users have made of it. Navajo is what it is partly because it is a human language, partly because it is the language of the Navajo’ (1996: 26), Hymes’ research often privileged a singular language for the entextualization and the performance of narrative. In fact, one might beg to differ with Hymes’ claim that ‘[l]anguages may disappear through the destruction of their speakers, but not through the publication of linguistic papers and maps’ (Hymes 1996: 29). If we take languages to mean linguistic varieties and repertoires of speech communities and acknowledge that the material resources produced by scholars are always only partial representations of these linguistic environments, then when no speakers remain (or only partially recollect past linguistic practices and knowledge) and the project is to revitalize or renew a language, such publications (and maps) will determine, or at least constrain, the range of knowledge (linguistic and otherwise) that is
Politics of Language Endangerment

retrievable. Thus, while no direct connection may exist between the documents produced by scholars and the endangerment (or destruction) of a language, indirect connections can certainly be found between the representational strategies of voice and the opportunities for recreation or renewal that they may offer.

Developing further Hymes’ concern with inequality and language, scholars such as Susan Philips, Susan Gal, and Jane H. Hill elaborated relationships between linguistic practice and social inequality within their own research and scholarship, often in the guise of a Bourdieusian political economy of language. Philips (1983), for example, examined the sociolinguistic environment of Warm Springs students’ interactional expectations. She revealed that these students were socialized into different styles of interaction and learning than the institutional style promoted and positively evaluated by the teachers in their classrooms and practiced by non-Indian students. Gal, studying language shift in Austria, showed that the sociolinguistic patterns she discovered in a Hungarian-speaking community resulted from different ideological orientations and economic opportunities, aligning with sex roles and status expectations (Gal 1979). On the other hand, her analysis of causatives and narrow users’ innovations in the field-defining volume Language Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Death, showed that even in shifting repertoires, where opportunities for acquisition may be diminished, grammatical word formation knowledge was productive across users, though variable (Gal 1989a). While younger generations were shifting away from conventional lexical items and grammatical patterns, the interactional expectations of the sociolinguistic environment stimulated new linguistic forms. More importantly, her work reveals the importance of investigating the tensions and conflicts surrounding linguistic practice, from the interactional to the political and ideological: ‘[m]ore broadly this suggests that we should examine the linguistic changes occurring during language shift not only through the metaphor of death and decay that the “pastoral” tradition provides, but also through an image of conflict and competition between differing forces – cognitive, interactional, symbolic – whose effects on the details of linguistic practice are sometimes contradictory’ (Gal 1989a: 330). Similarly, in a commentary on Gal’s chapter, Woolard (1989: 365) emphasizes the need for researchers to best begin by anchoring [their] generalizations in speakers’ activities. Finally, Jane and Kenneth Hill in their extensive study of Mexicano (Nahuatl) reveal a relationship between individuals’ practices (linguistic, social, economic) and their ideological orientations to Spanish and Mexicano along a continuum of power and solidarity (Hill and Hill 1986). Like Gal, Hill 1989 shows how, even in linguistic repertoires indicative of language shift, speakers exhibit a full range of expression, whether through calquing, innovative word formation, or some other creative development. While contemporary studies of language endangerment have transitioned from a concern with generalizable patterns and an emphasis on language (grammar) to the political, economic, and social conditions affecting the sociolinguistic environment and linguistic variation, these field-defining studies foregrounded this transition and on-going concerns with power, inequality, and political economy.

In examining the relationship between language and political economy, Susan Gal (1989b: 348) identified two points of contact, the first pertaining to inequality and the control of representations as ‘a source of social power, . . . [and] a likely locus of conflict and struggle’, and the second attending to interpersonal power relations and ‘the exercise of institutional power in which language is also a constitutive element’ (1989b: 349–351). Both points are concerned with how language participates in the valuing and evaluation of human diversity (cf. Hymes 1996). Given the central role of institutions in managing power and inequality, it is not surprising that they have played a significant role in both creating the situation for language endangerment (e.g. through boarding and residential schooling in the United States and Canada; see Hinton and Meek, forthcoming) and defining the unequal relations between members of
minority language communities and supporters of majority language practices. This attention to the social complexities of situations of endangerment distinguishes contemporary studies of language endangerment from previous eras.

4 Current Contributions and Research: Beyond Language Endangerment – Politics and Ideologies

...ideology...is an inevitable component of all politics...in maintaining or achieving asymmetrical and exploitative relations of power, that is, in distorting or obfuscating or constraining possible understandings, possible imaginings of the self, and dialogic and other human relations (Friedrich 1989: 301–302).

Transitioning from attempts to develop a diagnostic framework for identifying and remediying endangered languages, contemporary linguistic anthropological research on language endangerment has begun to examine the ideological aspects of endangered language scenarios, considering not only the politics between polities but within them as well, and the layers of contestation surrounding issues of endangerment and the scaling of power and authority in the sanctioning of expertise, competence, and access. In their introduction to an edited volume on Native American ideologies, Kroskrity and Field point out that beliefs and feelings about language — and those about particular languages — are indeed an acknowledged part of the processes of language shift and language death that threaten many non-state-supported languages (2009: 4). Investigations of beliefs and feelings about language range from a concern with discourses of endangerment and linguistic entitlement (e.g., Cavanaugh 2009, Duchêne and Heller 2007, Hill 2002, Kroskrity 2011, Moore et al. 2010, Muehlmann 2012, Swinehart and Graber 2012) to practices of scholarly documentation (e.g., Kroskrity 2013a, b, Moore 2006, Nevins 2013b, Webster 2013) and textual and performative habits of representation and evaluation (e.g., Bender 2002, Carr and Meek 2013, Jaffe 2013, Kroskrity 2012, Makihara 2013, Meek 2010, Nevins 2013a, Patrick 2003). This research also crosscuts domains of practice — national, institutional, and individual — in their examinations of the social work that such endangered language projects envision, execute, and accomplish. Because there has been an abundance of research and writing in this arena, the rest of this section will focus on a few select pieces to demonstrate these dimensions and their entanglements with the tensions of expectations.

The politics of people affect the vitality of language (Perley 2011), whether through institutional position or individual commitment. In Defying Maliseet Language Death, Bernard Perley provides an intimate portrait of his own heritage aboriginal language, a language his mother acquired as a first language but that he did not. It is a familiar portrait of language death in many ways. And yet Perley points out that language death is more than just the fragmented aftermath of colonial injustice. Instead he argues that individuals play as much of a role in the state of a language as the history they have endured. He demonstrates ethnographically that individual agency has as much impact on language change and endangerment as the colonial regimes that implement policy. In particular, Perley shows how the relationships of people to each other and to language affect the vitality of practice associated with particular languages (English, French, and most especially Maliseet). Whether as writing, reading, conversing, narrating, performing, or lamenting, each practice creates and indexes a unique relationship between an individual and the (linguistic) practice enacted — as a kindergartner learning to identify letters and sounds or a fourth-grader learning to write a prayer, as a councilman performing an introduction in Maliseet or a fluent First Nations leader sitting silently in attendance, as director of a university program or an anthropologist in training conducting fieldwork, as a young woman flirting in a bar or a politician describing his constituency to her — all of these people have unique, if overlapping,
relationships and commitments to the vitality of Maliseet. Such individual experiences and expectations affect opportunities for speaking, and thus affect the vitalities of language. Finally, in recognizing individual agency, Perley recommends that language suicide is a more appropriate term for describing what is happening to the Maliseet language, rather than the less person-centered phrase of language death, or language endangerment.

In Urla’s ethnography (2012), Reclaiming Basque, she similarly examines the impact of individual actions on the vitalities of language by carefully detailing the history of Basque language movements and the discourses encompassing them. She is equally concerned, however, with the politics of institutions and the role that statistical discourse has played in more recent iterations. She shows how enumeration of any sort is a (Foucauldian) governmental technology of power, wherein a regime of truth gets discursively drawn and transforms a political problem into a technical one (Urla 2012: 113). Such processes have dominated the public and popular discourse on language endangerment, providing truthful and thus unquestionable portraits of dying languages for the interested consumer and potential investor. From politics to business, Urla demonstrates how contemporary discourses of language revival are drawing on managerial rhetoric. In provocative illustration, chapter six ends with this observation: ‘It was not without a sense of irony that one of my language-advocate friends gestured to the book on her nightstand that she and her fellow scholar/activist colleagues had decided to read: it was not Fanon; it was not Fishman. It was a translation of management guru Steven Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People’ (Urla 2012: 168).

In a similar fashion, Brigittine French’s ethnography of Mayan linguistics in Guatemala sheds light on the politics of language in its most seminal sense, investigating historically and ethnographically the role of Mayan language politics in the modernist struggle for state recognition through traditional practices. She notes that [i]ndeed, the few but important victories Maya leaders have won involve the state’s recognition of difference based upon the cultural distinctiveness of Mayan languages and their provisional inclusion in the Guatemalan national community (French 2010: 5). While similar ethnolinguistic nation-building efforts can be found elsewhere, French builds her ethnography in conversation with Bauman and Briggs’ Voices of Modernity (2003), arguing that their analytic framework, in particular, directs analytic attention to the construction of modernity and tradition as one of the most important ways through which language forms and collective identities become linked (French 2010: 10). In almost explicit demonstration of a modernist construction, French shares a statement from a Mayan linguist and leader of the Maya ethnonationalist movement, Dr Demetrio Cojtí: ‘The Mayanist movement is at once predominantly conservative on the cultural plane and predominantly innovative and revolutionary on the political and economic plane. For that reason it is said that the Maya movement’s path leads not only to Tikal (traditionalism) but also to New York and Tokyo (modernism)’ (cited in French 2010: 11). To investigate the unfolding of these twin processes of modernity, French focuses on metalinguistic discourse and the scholarly regimentation of language, Mayan varieties and Spanish. Similarly to Hill and Hill’s analysis of the relationship between Mexicano and Spanish, French describes a corresponding distribution of labor and ideological similitude, where Spanish aligns with progress and the indigenous language with tradition. Most strikingly, she shows how the seemingly benign act of documenting a grammar becomes a political act of recognition and resistance. She discusses how the first international linguists (Summer Institute of Linguistics or SIL) to begin documenting Mayan languages were aligned with the Guatemalan government’s agenda toward indigenous peoples, i.e. to assimilate these populations into Spanish dominance and the state. Indigenous Maya linguists eventually began to repudiate SIL’s approach, and the state’s, developing their own system of documentation and representation, which did not rely on or emphasize the sameness.
of grammar between Spanish and Mayan varieties. Instead, these linguists and their supporters (Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín – PLFM) developed ‘a new orthography for Mayan languages . . . that would consolidate Mayan linguistic struggles for self-determination around linguistic difference . . . ’ In effect, the PLFM created a process for attaining a regimentation of the sound systems of Mayan languages, which would establish linguistic difference on a scientific and rational basis, and which would pave the way for making assertions of cultural difference by native speakers/analysts (French 2010: 56–57). Complicating this further, local norms regarding linguistic practice reveal gendered and age-graded divisions that challenge the generic Pan-Mayan stance toward unification through language; not everyone speaks the same way, nor should they. While many linguistic anthropologists have written critically about the historical antecedents to contemporary documentary efforts (see citations above), French has demonstrated the significance and the complexity of these efforts and their negotiation for the indigenous communities involved. She also highlights a disciplinary distinction that may require a bit more reflection: where does linguistic anthropology (or anthropological linguistics) end and applied linguistics begin, and how are, or should, those conducting basic research on endangered languages be involved in these applied efforts, and their underlying politics?

5 Recommendations for Practice, Part 1: On Applied Efforts and Collaboration

Many, if not all, of the ethnographies on language endangerment and revitalization have grown out of interactions and collaborations with indigenous communities, committed individual speakers, and supportive governments (such as Paul Kroskrity’s work with Rosalie Bethel, Marybeth Nevin’s work with Rebekah Moody and the Ndee Biyati’ Apache language project, and my work with Leda Jules, Aboriginal Language Services, and the Kaska Tribal Council). These collaborations and the labor provided are critical elements of the research, not merely as best practices for conducting research but as an epistemological necessity. For example, Nevins’ multiple and diverse collaborations provide the basis for her ethnography, an investigation of language advocacy efforts on the Fort Apache reservation and their intended and unintended effects (Nevins 2013a). She argues that research must attend to the diversity of responses, innovation, and the success of apparent failures (2013a: 224) in order to ‘make sense of the situation that [a] community finds itself in’ (Nevins and Nevins 2012: 147–148), and that ethnography can help reframe the ‘noise’ of community critique of language programs into alternate claims to authority and into alternate definitions of community that are themselves germane to the ongoing relevance of indigenous languages (2013a: 9); see also Ahlers 2014, Debenport 2010, 2011). Granadillo and Orcutt-Gachiri reach a similar conclusion: ‘. . . every situation of language endangerment carries with it effects that cannot be foreseen’ (2011: 5) and calls for a need to make ethnographic fieldwork a standard component of language endangerment research. The growing expectation across diverse participants in indigenous language advocacy is that of labor, in spite of conflicting political commitments.

Another development has been the push to involve academic institutions in these pursuits. Morgan (2005) has detailed the involvement of Michigan State University in ongoing efforts to revitalize Anishinaabegmowin (Ojibwe languages) and the challenges indigenous language programs at the university–level can face. Baldwin and Olds (2007; see also Leonard 2011) demonstrate the usefulness of collaboration across institutions, yet at the same time emphasize the importance of tribal control. They discuss the Myaamia Project, created among those with a vested interest in the continuation and survival of [Myaamia] community’s traditional language and culture (2007: 285). This includes non-Native scholars and institutions, such as the University
Politics of Language Endangerment

of Miami in Ohio. However, the objectives for the project are determined in relation to the applicability they have for the community. Thus, they distinguish between essential (reconstructing their traditional lunar calendar) and nonessential research (establishing a genetic relationship to Ohio's prehistoric mound builders), the ultimate goal being the renewal of Myaamia and the restoration of a traditional worldview. Investigating similarly entwined linguistic and cultural revitalization efforts, Michelle Jacob (2013) elucidates the politics of Yakama revitalization and the steps that individual tribal members took to overcome certain collaborative obstacles, including establishing an NGO in order to circumvent tribal politics and government control.

Within academic fields that study language, scholars have begun to articulate more explicitly their interdependent relationships with language communities and the need to develop research projects that benefit both the scholar and the community (see, e.g., Ahlers 2009). In a recent festschrift in Jane Hill's honor, Bischoff, Cole, Fountain, and Miyashita (2013) elaborate on the intersection of documentary linguistics, endangered languages, and social justice, a theme exemplified in several of the chapters in this volume. In Bischoff et al. (2013), Stacey Oberly, for example, provides a study of prosody in five elder speakers of Southern Ute, arguing that such linguistic documentation and analytic work is necessary for language preservation and revitalization in order to sound Ute. Colleen Fitzgerald, in her analysis of Tohono O’odham high vowels, works with an extensive data set collected over multiple generations and suggests that (past and present) phonological documentation serves both the needs of linguists and the needs of communities of speakers of endangered languages. Bischoff and Fountain’s chapter on a grassroots project of web-based language archiving for the Coeur d’Alene language community demonstrates some of the complicated political and practical terrain that such projects encounter. This chapter focuses in particular on the challenge of how to make readily available legacy materials and other documentation without external funding and without technical expertise (Bischoff et al. 2013: 177). Additional challenges arose around issues of appropriate access and orthographic conventions. Despite such challenges, the authors encourage the development of such projects because ‘[t]echnologies such as web development have the potential to support the expression of local knowledge in ways that serve the needs of community members, academics, and policy makers without excluding local voices from the conversation’ (Bischoff et al. 2013: 197). Finally, in Paul Kroskrity’s chapter on Native American languages and narrative discrimination, he examines the logic with which scholars Anna Gayton and Stanley Newman negatively assessed the features of Yokuts and Western Mono narratives. He shows that such assessments are an especially appropriate site for understanding the professional and entitled language ideologies that further contributed to the discursive marginalization of [indigenous] narrative traditions (2013a: 323; see also Kroskrity 2011, 2012, 2013b). He concludes by pointing out that it is the disciplinary expectations of these scholars that constrained narrative representations and ultimately marginalized the verbal artistry of the two language communities being documented. Thus, as evidenced by each of these cases, any and all collaboration is a political act with – for better and for worse – social and economic effects.

6 Recommendations for Practice, Part 2: On Discrimination and Linguistic Racism

The sciences of humankind have developed in the matrix of a certain relationship between one part of the world and the rest. Anthropology has been fairly described as the study of colored people by whites (Hymes 1996: 59).

As mentioned above, the Hymesian tradition brought with it an attention to inequality in practice, such as unequal distributions of power, unequal access, and unequal standards of
evaluation (Blommaert 2009, McCarty, Collins and Hopson 2011, Webster and Kroskrity 2013). Recently scholars working within language endangerment have begun to reconsider Hymes’ concern with inequality, focusing especially on narrative inequality, or what Paul Kroskrity has termed narrative or discursive discrimination. This shift has in part emerged as a result of prominent scholars writing about linguistic racism in white public spaces (see Bischoff et al. 2013). But, it has also emerged in relation to the reclamation of control by marginalized groups. For language endangerment, this turn has meant increased attention to, if not actual privileging of, the agendas of indigenous language communities. As mentioned above, collaboration and advocacy have become the norm for much of the research being carried out on language endangerment. Alongside this shift has been a renewed interest in the subtle ways in which language figures in acts of discrimination and marginalization, as discourses of difference (processes of enfigurement) and as contestations over membership/participation (boundary-making processes). These areas are mutually constitutive. Processes of enfigurement socialize novices into certain sets of expectations (of appearance, of performance, of norms and standards, and so forth). Boundary-making processes rely on enfiguring processes in order to define the limits of inclusion (from membership to nonmembership). Of course, both processes are dynamic, meaning that they are interactionally negotiated, contested, realized, and they are temporally fluid (recursive and emergent), meaning that they become anchored only through discursive acts but are not themselves inherently linked to a particular place or time. What is most illuminating about this research are the ways in which expectations inflect and complicate enfigurement and boundary-making, provoking certain evaluations and undermining others. Understanding expectations is central to understanding our own habits of discrimination (evaluation) in perpetuating racialized inequalities.

Narratives and their entextualized antecedents exemplify these processes. Much of the current scholarship on narratives in endangered language contexts has emphasized the variability of expectation and evaluation within community practice (see Kroskrity 2012 for examples). Recognition of this variability has in part arisen due to efforts at revitalization that involve efforts to perform linguistically and become subject to evaluation. Another approach has been to examine closely the epistemological proclivities of earlier documentarians. For example, Kroskrity (2013a, b) has analyzed the evaluative habits of two earlier academic researchers, who documented indigenous central California narratives. Their evaluative scale relied on the following negative features: lexical deficiency, lack of figurative language, simplicity, redundancy, lack of explication, lack of variation (repetitive), lack of formal structure (Kroskrity 2013a: 325). Each of these features predisposes the reviewer to a negative evaluation of the narratives. Webster (2011) presents a similar scene for Navajo author and poet Blackhorse Mitchell. Published in 1963, his novel, *Miracle Hill*, received a supportive yet disdainful introduction by literary critic T. D. Allen, describing Mitchell’s style of writing as primitive with a tangled grammar (Webster 2011: 65), an evaluation that then reverberated through later book reviews (2011: 67–69). As Webster highlights, because Navajo English is spoken and written by marginalized peoples, it can always be dismissed or devalued by outside assumptions concerning ‘standard’ English and ‘aesthetic principles’. The expectations for Navajo English are for an English that is ‘primitive’ and ‘incompetent’ . . . What is not taken seriously is that Mitchell might be doing something with his use of Navajo English besides mere documentation (Webster 2011: 66). Similar misinterpretations of form appear in both of these examples. Meek (2011) considers how forms in practice that deviate from expert listener expectations, position actors differently, resulting yet again in the ongoing marginalization of indigenous ways of speaking. In her case, she traces the popular, public representations of American Indian speech in film (especially children’s media) in the classroom, where teachers and other expert evaluators are primed to interpret First
Nations students’ linguistic performances as remedial. All three of these cases illustrate the subtle ways in which experts’ own social milieus and habits of expertise predispose them to negative evaluations of already marginalized indigenous practices.

Expert expectations and evaluations of indigenous performance are not the only arenas in which acts of discrimination creep in. In Feliciano-Santos’ ethnographic research on Taíno language renewal (2011), she focuses on the establishment of relatedness through interaction, especially in terms of the development and manufacturing of Taínones. These efforts include explicit political acts as well as more subtle interactional moments. As part of this reconfiguration of Taínones, language figures centrally because it is one of the key features recognized by governments, institutions, and people as signifying some authentic indigenous identity. This movement also destabilizes popular and historical conceptions of Puerto Ricanness. Intimately linked to understandings of authenticity and citizenship, the reclamation of a Taíno image, along with the revitalization of associated linguistic and cultural practices, reframes and at times fragments these nationally-circulating representations of the ideal Puerto Rican citizen. In particular, her analysis of classroom interactions, language workshops, and protests reveal how people incorporate new individuals and distance others from their projects, interactionally defining interlocutors as either being or not being Taíno. The endangered language, in form and in interaction, participates in enfiguring individuals as Indian while also establishing them as (potential) members at certain moments (classroom lessons on heritage) and excluding them at others (protests at archaeological sites).

Before I conclude, consider this excerpt from Kroskrity:

As for narrative discrimination, I think it is an especially appropriate tool for understanding how linguistic and cultural experts – ones who are overtly advocates of the languages/cultures they describe – can be recruited to participate in racializing projects that are much larger than their individual contributions . . . discursive discrimination may play a further role in emphasizing the inevitability of imposing standards and the ease with which attempts to appreciate the narrative conventions of others’ are saturated with discursive expectations and evaluations, typically located at the level of practical consciousness, that often prevent an informed understanding or a constructive representation . . . Academic scholars may be experts capable of focusing a bright light on the limited regions of their expertise . . . but they are elsewhere common-sense social (i.e. national) actors who are likely to (re-)produce familiar cultural patterns stored in their practical consciousness.

Kroskrity (2013b: 335; emphasis added)

Like Nevins’ call to do ethnography as part of language endangerment research, Kroskrity also encourages us to consider the limits of expertise and its mediation in familiar cultural patterns stored in their [our] practical consciousness.

7 Future Directions: Language Endangerment in the Twenty-first Century

There are multiple cultural meanings and vested interests in genetic facts, and to confront their concealment is the start of an anthropological understanding of the science of human heredity (Marks 2012: 259).

The quote above prompts us to poke at the cultural underbelly of biological facts, reminiscent of previous social theorists’ conceptualizations of representations as social facts (Rabinow 1986). For studies of language, genetic facts also constitute in part linguistic facts, such that
exchanging genetic for linguistic produces a statement that similarly resonates with linguistic anthropological approaches to human behavior, that is, an attention to processes of concealment and investment. As shown above, much of the current research on language endangerment is concerned with the multiple cultural meanings and vested interests entailed in the diagnostics of endangerment and contemporary projects of language revitalization.

Yet, what exactly is language endangerment? Is it language change gone awry or language contact at its most extreme? Is it a dimension of linguistic racism? In a review of literature on language death, Salikoko Mufwene (2004), a linguist at the University of Chicago, broadened the question to include language birth and argued for a deeper temporal gaze, pointing out that ‘[t]he overemphasis on worldwide economic globalization as the primary cause of language loss has prevented any fruitful comparison between, on the one hand, recent and current evolutions and, on the other, what must have occurred during the earliest political and economic hegemonies in the history of mankind’ (Mufwene 2004: 202). That is, language endangerment is part of a continuum that involves the emergence of new varieties and the recognition of the political-economic circumstances of language change. Of course, Susan Gal and Kathryn Woolard made similar appeals (Dorian 1998). Thus, while languages change, dialects shift, new linguistic varieties emerge and fade, the distinguishing feature of language endangerment is the political scenario that undergirds the existential trajectory of the languages considered endangered. As Mufwene (2004) also notes, much of the research on language endangerment has focused primarily on the indigenous languages of European ex-colonies and on minority languages of the European Union. If we expand our gaze further still by including anthropological research on language shift, small languages and small communities (Dorian 1998), regardless of their history of contact with European nations, reveal the significance of politics in understanding language endangerment, including language revitalization. The politics of contact remain in the foreground, whether as the result of direct acts of colonization or more subtle forms of global incorporation and the opening of new markets.

This is not a new point. Duchêne and Heller, in the introduction to their co-edited volume (2007) on discourses of language endangerment, highlight the significance of the political-economic context within which discourses of endangerment have arisen. Discourses about language endangerment are circumscribed by the politics of difference and the stabilization of diversity within the nation state. They are discourses about maintaining a status quo of difference. Duchêne and Heller conclude by posing the following: ‘Rather than assuming we must save languages, perhaps we should be asking instead who benefits and who loses from understanding languages the way we do, what is at stake for whom, and how and why language serves as a terrain for competition’ (2007: 11). This statement concisely defines the conception of politics that has framed this chapter. The history of language endangerment research demonstrates how politics is the coordination of – including conflict over – particular sets of interests and investments that begin to delineate, configure, and constrain the vastness of linguistic practice and human diversity. It is the relationship between social relations, patterns of practice, and systems (including histories) of inequality in the coordination and recognition of groups; in other words, it is the management of diversity in the coordination of resemblance (assimilation).

Within the political scenario of endangerment, then, one of the crucial elements affecting the (assignment of) status of a(n) (indigenous) language is the vision of the ruling class, a nation’s government, or the academy; what are their mission(s)? What role does language play (and which language(s)) in the development of the mission? How will the mission be executed, and what consequences will its execution have for nonofficial languages? This national, institutional dimension might begin as (economic) policy (or war) but is merely the political tip. Another significant dimension is the interpretation and implementation of policy; how will languages be represented? Which varieties will be documented? Who will assess and regulate the production
of these materials and how will they be used, and by whom? Federally regulated expectations come into play at this stage, with all the complications that carrying out a mandate, or a vision, entails. Authority must be established and technocratic tools of regimentation devised (cf. Partridge 2012); teachers trained and curriculum materials produced, modified, expanded, or simplified. Finally, individual participation in, and responses to, the politics of governance becomes the final dimension that distinguishes processes of language endangerment from other investigations of language change. Contemporary studies of the politics of language endangerment critically explore these questions, ranging in their attention to nations, institutions, and individuals. They all variously show how the social-political life of a language is the most critical component for predicting its trajectory and possible future iteration(s). Or, more simply, what people expect and do with a language will determine its status, its state, and its future.

Acknowledgments

I am especially grateful to Nancy Bonvillain for her incredible patience and support of this chapter, and to Georgia Ennis for her feedback. All errors are my own.

Related Topics

7 Language Ideologies (Kroskrity); 8 Social Subordination and Language (Huayhua) 18 New and Emergent Languages (Riley); 21 Language and Nationalism (Haque); 28 Language Maintenance and Revitalization (Cowell); 29 Language Endangerment and Revitalization Strategies (Brittain, MacKenzie).

Note

1 An advanced search of AAA journals on the anthrosource site (www.anthrosource.net) for the phrase, language endangerment, resulted in 7 hits, only two of which were research articles; endangered languages resulted in 5 hits, one of which was a research-length article, and language shift resulted in 12 hits. The search parameters were all journals and anywhere in the article for the exact phrase. For comparison, bilingualism resulted in 30 hits; indigeneity, 48 entries; schizophrenia, 24 entries; biodiversity, 21 entries; fashion, 88 entries; tourism, 185 entries.

References

Barbra A. Meek


## Further Reading

This edited volume defined the field of language endangerment across disciplines.

This edited volume extended the purview of language endangerment beyond grammar.

This book covers the how-to’s of language revitalization and the ethics of research with endangered language communities.

This edited collection presents the policies and politics encompassing a range of cases of language endangerment from aboriginal languages to French, Spanish, and English.