Language endangerment

24.1 Introduction

Language endangerment has only become a concern of linguists relatively recently. A handful of important articles were published before 1975 (Swadesh 1948; Fishman 1964; Haas 1968; Miller 1971) but they were unusual. In 1977 the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* published a volume dedicated to language death which included articles by several scholars who would be central in the development of research in the field such as Nancy Dorian and Jane Hill (Dorian 1977; Hill and Hill 1977). Two important monographs appeared shortly after this (Dorian 1981; Gal 1979) which both raised theoretical issues in the context of a particular linguistic situation (a Scots Gaelic variety for Dorian and the shift from Hungarian to German in part of Austria for Gal). The following decade saw important new research continue to appear (e.g. Dorian 1989), but 1992 is the year which sees the start of a large increase in the amount of attention given to the topic.

In 1991, Ken Hale organised a symposium on endangered languages for the Linguistics Society of America (LSA). This led to the publication of a group of essays in *Language* (Hale 1992) and to the formation of the LSA’s Committee for Endangered Languages and Their Preservation. The prominence of these activities brought the issues to the forefront for the linguistic community, and numerous publications have followed. These include a handbook and atlas (Austin and Sallabank 2011; Moseley 2010 [Wurm 2001 and Moseley are successive editions of the same work]), volumes devoted to examining language endangerment in different parts of the world, collections of articles looking at various issues or aspects of the problem (e.g. Brenzinger 2007), monographs directed mainly at a scholarly audience (e.g. Sallabank 2013), and books by linguists which are directed to a more general audience (e.g. Evans 2009) as well as books by non-specialists (e.g. Abley 2004).

In addition to this intense research interest from linguists, there has been a growing body of interdisciplinary research. Such work includes applications of models from conservation biology to language (Sutherland 2003; Amano *et al.* 2014), comparisons of linguistic diversity and biological diversity (Gorenflo *et al.* 2012), and the use of models from both physical geography (Gavin and Sibanda 2012) and human geography (Minett and Wang 2008).
Several major initiatives which made large amounts of money available for work on endangered languages also began in this period. These include the project Dokumentation Bedrohte Sprache (DoBeS) with funds from the Volkswagen Stiftung (from 2000), the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (from 2002) and the joint National Science Foundation and National Endowment for the Humanities programme Documenting Endangered Languages (initially from 2004, as a permanent programme from 2007). The focus of these programmes is wholly or partially on documentation of endangered languages, a point to which we return in §24.5.

The amount of activity relating to language endangerment in the last twenty years indicates a strong consensus that there is a significant problem which needs to be addressed. Estimates of the scale of the problem vary, however. Some of the variation may be attributed to disagreements about the best way to assess the extent to which any language is endangered (or, to take a more positive view, to estimate the vitality of a language). We turn to these questions in the following sections, before considering the nature of responses to the situation.

24.2 The extent of the problem

One of the essays in Hale’s Language contribution (1992) is by Michael Krauss and it sets out a numerical case for the gravity of the problem of language endangerment. He bases this on the simplest measure of the viability of a language, the number of speakers. Krauss suggests that a language must have more than 100,000 speakers to be ‘Safe’, that is, to be likely to be spoken for at least the next 100 years. On the basis of the figures then available from Ethnologue (Lewis et al. 2014 is the current edition), Krauss shows this to mean 600 Safe languages from a global list of more than 6,000 languages which in turn implies an extinction rate of 90 per cent in the current century.

Aside from questions about whether speaker numbers are the best measure to consider (to which we shall return), the method by which this estimate is derived is certainly open to criticism. Many of the numbers used must be treated with caution: the number of languages given by Ethnologue is as good an estimate as we have, but the knowledge it represents varies by region and also depends on decisions about what to treat as separate languages and what to treat as dialects. The decision to take 100,000 speakers as a cut-off point is arbitrary (and any other figure would be also), but there are reasons to think that it is too high. Languages have been reported to be surviving well with small speaker numbers, both in what are claimed to be essentially monolingual situations (Pirahã, Everett 2005) and in multilingual situations (Kaki Ae, Clifton 1994).

Other scholars using other methodologies have arrived at estimates which, while still alarming, are not as horrifying as that provided by Krauss. Simons and Lewis (2013), also working with data from Ethnologue, but basing their estimate on assigning languages a position on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (see §24.3 below for discussion of this instrument), present a figure of 19 per cent of the world’s languages which are not being learned by children (p. 14). They note, however, that there is wide variation by region with 78 per cent of languages in North America and 85 per cent of languages in Australia and New Zealand not being learned by children or already extinct. Krauss had already drawn attention to the different rates of language endangerment in different geographical areas. Campbell et al. (2013), using the Catalogue of Endangered Languages, arrive at a figure of 46 per cent of the world’s languages which can be considered as endangered. Harmon and Loh (2010) use an Index of Linguistic Diversity to estimate...
changes in linguistic diversity over the period between 1970 and 2005. Based on a sample of 1,500 languages, Harmon and Loh find that overall linguistic diversity declined by 20 per cent in that period with indigenous languages declining by 21 per cent. Again regional variation is considerable, with a decline of over 60 per cent for the Americas and 30 per cent for the Pacific including Australia. Amano et al. (2014) apply criteria accepted in the study of biological diversity: restricted geographical range, small population size and rapid decline in population. On this basis, they estimate that 25 per cent of the world’s languages are threatened, but again regional variation is highlighted – with the Himalayas, north-western North America and the tropics identified as areas with higher levels of endangerment.

The results discussed in the previous paragraph suggest that Krauss’ 1992 figure of 90 per cent of languages being endangered was an overstatement resulting from a methodology which was too simple. However, accepting a lower figure does not mean denying that there is a serious problem. It is important to place the numbers in a wider context: the conservative estimate of Sutherland (2003) has 31.7 per cent of languages (based on the estimate of 6,809 extant languages) as vulnerable or worse and notes that ‘[e]ven with this conservative comparison it is clear that the risks to languages exceed those to birds and mammals’ (p. 277).

### 24.3 Assessing the vitality of languages

The previous section discussed various estimates of the state of the languages of the world which are largely based on quantitative measures such as speaker populations. Such measures can provide an overview of the global situation, but they are less useful when we wish to assess the status of an individual language or to compare the state of several languages. Different scholars have arrived at different vocabularies for describing the vitality of languages, and their methodologies vary in details, but there is a consensus about the factors which are most important in making such assessments. The two which are part of almost every means of assessing vitality are intergenerational transmission and domains of use. Wurm (2001: 14) suggests that a language is endangered when it is ‘no longer learned by children, or at least by a large part of the children of that community (say at least 30 per cent)’, and Steinhauer (forthcoming: 1) takes a similar position: ‘a language … is probably irreversibly endangered when the original language is no longer passed on to new generations’. Himmelmann (forthcoming) emphasises the other factor, taking as an ‘essential symptom for the vitality of a language the number and quality of domains in which it is used’ and proposes as a definition of endangerment: ‘languages whose usage domains are presently undergoing a rapid reduction’. Although it is not mentioned as symptomatic of language endangerment, we will see below that in assessing the status of languages reference is often also made to the extent to which information about the language has been collected.

Even if there is some agreement about the methods used in assessing linguistic vitality, the terminology used to present results is not consistent and it is not always obvious how different schemes can be aligned with one another. For example, Krauss in his 1992 essay (see Hale) spoke of languages as being ‘safe’, ‘moribund’ and ‘extinct’. Dixon (2011 [1980]) surveys the languages of Australia and classifies them as ‘extinct’, ‘on the path to extinction’, and ‘relatively healthy’. This can be compared with Krauss’ categories easily, and the comparison can be extended to include McConvell’s categorisation of Australian languages as ‘strong’, ‘endangered’, and no longer spoken or ‘sleeping’ (McConvell 2005: 24). But other categorisations make more distinctions. Kinkade (1991) classifies languages into five groups: (1) already extinct, (2) near extinction, (3) endangered, (4) viable but
with a small population base, and (5) viable; UNESCO recognises four levels of endangerment (Vulnerable, Definitely endangered, Severely endangered, Critically endangered) as well as an Extinct category and (at least by implication) an ‘Other’ category (Moseley 2010); the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS, Fishman 1991) has eight levels and the extended version of this used by *Ethnologue* has eleven – or thirteen if two divisions within levels are counted separately (EGIDS; both GIDS and EGIDS are discussed in more detail below).

One approach is detailed in McConvell (2005) which refers to earlier work (McConvell and Thieberger 2001) that outlines the methodology and the indicators that the authors used in the State of the Environment report to try to evaluate language vitality. In their introduction McConvell and Thieberger point out that their goal is to provide a baseline of data against which subsequent surveys could be compared. They assert that ‘for the first time indicators have been rigorously defined and systematically applied to the data’ (2001: 2). Indicators are:

elements which can be measured relatively easily and cost-effectively, which do not give a complete picture of the state of a certain resource, but which indicate relatively reliably the overall condition of the resource and trends in its condition over time.

( ibid.)

The five-level ranking of four indicators used by McConvell and Thieberger is given in Table 24.1. The table is not intended to imply that a language will be ranked at the same level for each indicator; the arrangement in rows is a convenience for presentation. A group of experts has developed another methodology on behalf of UNESCO (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages 2003).

This method uses six factors to assess linguistic vitality and state of endangerment, two factors to assess language attitudes, and one factor to evaluate the urgency of documentation, and these are presented in Table 24.2. The document describing this method emphasises that it should be applied as a whole:

*No single factor alone can be used to assess a language’s vitality or its need for documentation.* Language communities are complex and diverse; even assessing the number of actual speakers of a language is difficult. … Taken together, these nine factors are especially useful for characterizing a language’s overall sociolinguistic situation.

(UNESCO 2003: 7)

One of the UNESCO factors, the proportion of the speakers of the language within the total population, is clearly important but is rarely assessed in other methodologies.

The EGIDS is currently significant as the latest edition of *Ethnologue* (Lewis *et al.* 2014) gives an estimated value on this scale for every language based on the estimate of the proportion of language reportedly not being transmitted to children (Simons and Lewis 2013). There is a possibility that this measure is too conservative, because as part of their methodology, Simons and Lewis used level 6a (Vigorous) as a default value. An initial automated process assigned almost 3,100 languages to level 6a; a review reduced this number to just over 2,500. Simons and Lewis defend these default estimates by reference to Fishman’s claim that ‘the lion’s share’ of the world’s languages are at GIDS 6 (Fishman 1991: 92).
Joshua Fishman presented what he described as ‘a graded typology of threatened statuses’, the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Fishman 1991: 87–109). The title of this scale is perhaps a little misleading; as can be seen in Table 24.3, stages 6 to 8 on the scale do focus on intergenerational transmission (or its absence), but the greater part of the scale (stages 1 to 5) is more concerned with domains of use.
Table 24.3 Fishman’s GIDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 8</td>
<td>Most vestigial users of Xish are socially isolated old folks and Xish needs to be re-assembled from their mouths and memories and taught to demographically unconcentrated adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 7</td>
<td>Most users of Xish are a socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active population but they are beyond child-bearing age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 6</td>
<td>The attainment of intergenerational informal oracy and its demographic concentration and institutional reinforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 5</td>
<td>Xish literacy in home, school and community, but without taking on extra-communal reinforcement of such literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 4</td>
<td>Xish in lower education (types a and b) that meets the requirements of compulsory education laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>Use of Xish in the lower work sphere (outside of the Xish neighbourhood/community) involving interaction between Xmen and Ymen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>Xish in lower governmental services and mass media but not in the higher spheres of either</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>Some use of Xish in higher level educational, occupational, governmental and media efforts (but without the additional safety provided by political independence)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Xish is any language, Xmen are speakers of that language, Ymen are speakers of another language.

Recently, Lewis and Simons (2010) have presented an expanded version of the GIDS which is intended to include both the greater elaboration of the safe end of GIDS and the greater detail concerning endangerment given in the UNESCO scheme (Table 24.4).

Table 24.4 Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>The language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange and international policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>The language is used in education, work, mass media and government at the national level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>The language is used in education, work, mass media and government within major administrative subdivisions of a nation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Wider Communication</td>
<td>The language is used in work and mass media without official status to transcend language differences across a region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>The language is in vigorous use, with standardisation and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Developing</td>
<td>The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardised form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a</td>
<td>Vigorous</td>
<td>The language is used for face-to-face communication by all generations and the situation is sustainable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6b</td>
<td>Threatened</td>
<td>The language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but it is losing users.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
24.4 Types of linguistic diversity

The title of this chapter is ‘Language Endangerment’, and the discussion of the preceding sections has focused on issues such as the proportion of languages which are threatened and how the status of languages might be assessed. There is an underlying assumption here that it is the level of the language which is the appropriate level at which to consider questions about threats to the world’s linguistic diversity. In this section, this assumption will be questioned, and some alternative views canvassed as to what aspects of linguistic diversity should be of concern.

First, there are the well-known and long-standing problems of differentiating between languages and dialects. There are well-known cases where varieties are treated as distinct languages although linguistic criteria would not support the separation – such as the national languages of Indonesia and Malaysia, Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia, or the mainland Scandinavian languages. Equally, there are certainly cases where varieties which could or should be treated as distinct languages are not so recognised by Ethnologue. The information in Ethnologue corresponds to the list of languages assigned individual codes in ISO639-3, the registration authority for ISO639-3 and the publisher of Ethnologue being the same organisation (SIL International) and there is a process by which the list can be changed to reflect developing understanding of the relationships between varieties. As noted above, the way decisions are made about this distinction influences the figures which are used to estimate threats to linguistic diversity. Given that the cases where distinctions are poorly motivated linguistically involve nations and national languages and the cases where distinctions are not being made are more likely due to lack of information about varieties spoken by small groups often in remote locations, it seems reasonable to suggest that unrecognised distinctions probably outnumber unnecessary splits and that therefore the data source upon which most experts have relied probably underestimates linguistic diversity.

The problem of differentiation also includes the problem of finding neutral terms which we can use without making any theoretical claims about the status of the linguistic entities we are talking about. Here, we use the term variety to cover any system of linguistic acts which can be distinguished in some way from other related systems. Another term which can be used in a similar way is code. And more recently, the terms languoid and doculect have been proposed (Cysouw and Good 2013) where languoid is any ‘language-like object’ and doculect is ‘a linguistic variety as it is documented in a given resource’ (p. 342). This
The term is intended to be applied to any variety which has been identified in the literature: a published source which claims that a variety can be distinguished identifies a doculect.

Even if an accurate delineation of languages and dialects were possible, the question would remain as to whether the loss of interlinguistic and intralinguistic variation should be of equal concern. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1995) make a persuasive case that the loss of variation within languages should concern linguists just as much as the loss of languages. They suggest that as we cannot draw a clean boundary between language and dialect, we should treat all equally as part of the linguistic diversity which we value. Any moves which favour diversity should benefit all varieties. In their paper, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes discuss in detail a dialect of American English, the Ocracoke Brogue, and analyse the changing role it has had in its home community on Ocracoke Island off the coast of North Carolina linking these changes to changes in the construction of Ocracoke identity which are in turn linked to social and economic changes. Such arguments can be extended to cover other types of language-internal diversity; if loss of dialect diversity is a concern, then loss of specific registers such as song languages is also.

One problem which is encountered by many linguists in their work is that, even with the best intentions, the work may lead to a reduction of language-internal diversity. A description of a language will aim to cover whatever sorts of variation exist in the community of speakers, but it is inevitable that one variety becomes the focus of the linguist’s work. In some cases, the linguist will make a conscious decision in this regard; in other cases, external factors, such as the accessibility of language consultants or the fieldwork location, will impose a choice. The variety which is the focus of investigation may then come to be seen as privileged by the community: this is the variety which is recorded in a book and which is worthy of the attention of Westerners (Thieberger and Musgrave 2007; Perley 2012). In earlier times, similar effects came about due to linguistic choices by missionaries (Crowley 2001).

The argument raised by Wolfram and Schilling-Estes is equally applicable to other types of language-internal variation. For example, if we value the Ocracoke Brogue for the contribution it makes to linguistic diversity, should we not also value the system of speech styles in Javanese, which is based on clear delineation of social status? This system seems unlikely to survive in its traditional form as contact between Javanese and the national language, Bahasa Indonesia, continues (Errington 1998).

The social processes which lead to language endangerment are also processes which tend to favour standardisation. Such social changes as the move to more centralised education systems, integration into larger economic units of organisation and access to centralised media all depend on access to languages of wider communication, often standardised national languages. Thus, although we may be able in some cases to draw useful boundaries between languages and language-internal varieties, the pressures which threaten linguistic diversity apply in both cases. This in turn suggests that strategies which try to support linguistic diversity in general, rather than supporting particular varieties, may be a useful response to the current situation; we return to this point below.

One other issue relating to the value placed on different linguistic entities should be mentioned here also. Several scholars have noted that certain types of languages have received almost no attention in discussion of language endangerment, even when examples of such languages have already ceased being used or can be shown to be in imminent danger. Garrett (2006) discusses the situation with regard to contact languages (i.e. creoles and pidgins), and Nonaka (2004) discusses the case of an indigenous sign language. Garrett sees lack of historicity and lack of autonomy (that is, being viewed as lesser versions of...
Language endangerment

‘real’ languages) as amongst the factors which lead to a low value being accorded to contact language; other factors may be relevant in the case of indigenous sign languages but the effect of marginalisation is similar. These languages are nevertheless part of linguistic diversity and, in the context of the argument that has been developed in this section, they are therefore also part of what should concern us. Additionally, in the case of contact languages, they may play an important role in supporting the maintenance of diversity. As Mühlhäusler (2003: 242) notes:

[S]ustained linguistic diversity in the past included a range of solutions to intergroup communication [...]. It was the ability of speakers to communicate in other languages in particular Pidgins that helped them shield their own small languages against larger neighbouring ones.

24.5 Responses to language endangerment: language documentation

The preceding sections have at least tacitly accepted the position that language endangerment is a serious problem and that it demands some response from the linguistic community and indeed more widely. Before discussing some of the ways in which such responses have developed, it must be noted that there are some who have cast doubt on the idea that a response is necessary. An example of this is provided by Ladefoged (1992) in a response to the Language publication of Hale and his colleagues (Hale 1992). Ladefoged invokes the idea that the current situation is not especially alarming: ‘different cultures are always dying while new ones arise’ (p. 810) and that intervention is therefore not warranted. This view ignores the extent to which changes in economic systems and technology are impacting on the social organisation of the world in a way which is different from any previous historical period. Nation states have become the dominant political organisation of our world. This creates pressure towards linguistic homogenisation which is reinforced by changing patterns of residence; today, more than half of the world’s population live in cities (UNFPA 2007). The extent of these pressures can be gauged from the extent to which a handful of languages account for a large proportion of official languages. Krauss (in Hale 1992) gives English, French, Spanish and Arabic as accounting for the official languages of 115 out of 170 states (68 per cent). The other statistic which is particularly revealing here is the difference between the mean and median number of speakers per language: according to Ethnologue the relevant numbers are just under 886,000 and 7,000. The massive skew in the distribution indicates the extent to which a small number of languages are coming to dominate global life.

Ladefoged’s main argument is based on the notion of linguistics as an objective science, with the linguist’s objectivity being lost if political positions are taken with respect to scientific issues. Regardless of our position on the objectivity of linguistics (or other types of knowledge), Dorian in her response to Ladefoged makes it clear that there is no ‘neutral’ position in such debates (Dorian 1993). The non-interventionist position advocated by Ladefoged is as much a political statement as any overt alignment with the goals of a linguistic community.

The response of the discipline of linguistics over the last two decades has seen the emergence of a new field within the discipline, namely language documentation, and a substantial resulting change in focus in the type of work undertaken. The idea of documentary linguistics is initially set out by Himmelmann (1998) and has been developed by him and
other scholars over recent years. The serial publications *Language Documentation and Description* and *Language Documentation and Conservation* have contributed to the field; Himmelmann and colleagues produced an edited guide (Gippert et al. 2006), and the area has been emphasised in recent handbooks on both language endangerment (Austin and Sallabank 2011) and field methods for linguists (Thieberger 2012).

Documentary linguistics proposes that the process of collecting primary data and the process of analysing that data can and should be conceived of as separate activities (Himmelmann 1998). The task of the documentary linguist is to assemble a body of data which represents the linguistic practices of a community to as great an extent as is possible. This will be based on examples of language in use, but it may also include other material such as metalinguistic commentary. The data is intended for preservation and to be available to be used in various ways by various groups, including the speech community and its descendants, into the future. The attraction of these ideas as a response to language endangerment is obvious. Compiling a detailed description of a language is a time-consuming task (Dixon 1997: 138 estimates three years as a minimum); there are many threatened languages and for many of these few or no records exist. Concentrating on the collection of primary data therefore seems an efficient allocation of the limited resources available, both human and material. That such ideas became current at around the same time that high quality audio and video recording was becoming easily accessible and that methods for archiving and disseminating such data were also available contributed to the impetus which rapidly built and which is reflected in the funding initiatives mentioned in §24.1.

The crucial test of documentary linguistics has not yet been made. That is, no attempt has been made to base a detailed description of a language on documentation in the absence of any access to speakers of the language. It should, however, be noted that the separation of activities advocated by Himmelmann is by no means as clear-cut as the initial programmatic statement suggests. In the 1998 paper, Himmelmann already acknowledges that documentary linguistics is inevitably informed by aspects of linguistic theory, and that some descriptive analysis is necessary in making data comprehensible to those coming to it without background knowledge. It is generally accepted that some grammar notes will form part of a good documentation (see Mosel 2006a on the role of a sketch grammar) and this can be observed in many data collections housed in archives such as The Language Archive.

Language documentation has been criticised as not always being helpful to the cause of those working to maintain languages (Perley 2012). Perley argues that the metaphors used to talk about threatened languages (‘death’, ‘endangerment’ and ‘extinction’) frame actions. He is especially harsh on the idea (which he attributes to popular media), that documenting a language can be considered as ‘saving the language’. Instead, Perley suggests that the results of documentation are ‘artefacts of technological interventions, as well as expert valorisations of linguistic codes’ (p. 133). The literature on language documentation emphasises the importance of community involvement (Mosel 2006b) and this is supported to some extent by the protocols of the various funding agencies. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the overall funding model (Musgrave and Thieberger 2007) and the outputs of documentary linguistics are often more aligned with academic goals, specifically those of linguists, rather than with the desires or expectations of the speakers of languages. We turn therefore to a consideration of efforts towards language maintenance and language revival and the role of linguists in such activities.
24.6 Responses to language endangerment: maintenance and revival

We take language maintenance to mean efforts to enable a group to continue to speak or use a variety with which they have a historic association. Other terms used for such work are reversing language shift (Fishman 1991) and language revitalisation (Hinton and Hale 2001; Grenoble and Whaley 2006). Here, language revival will refer to attempts to recommence the use of a variety which has ceased to be spoken at some time in the past, sometimes also referred to as language reclamation (Amery 2000).

The work of Joshua Fishman is crucial in providing both a theoretical basis for language maintenance activities and outlining the nature of such activities in practice (Fishman 1991). For Fishman, the key issue in language endangerment is the weakening of intergenerational transmission of a language. Efforts to reverse language shift must most crucially be directed towards reversing that trend. Fishman’s model is essentially ecological, and a stable ecology in which family and community are safeguarded is seen as a precursor to the maintenance of indigenous knowledge and linguistic and cultural diversity. Functional compartmentalisation of the threatened language commonly accompanies language shift and language activists seeking to reverse language shift must determine which functions they want the threatened and non-threatened languages to play.

In Fishman’s model, a crucial step is the realisation by speakers of a variety that they cannot enact their identity completely in the language to which they are shifting; in Fishman’s formulation, it is not possible to be an Xman without speaking Xish (Fishman 1991 Ch. 2). This insight underlies the idea which occurs repeatedly in the literature that successful language maintenance must be led by members of the speaker community and that they will need very high levels of commitment to the project (see for example papers in Fishman 2001; and the case studies in Chapter 4 of Grenoble and Whaley 2006).

Another feature of language maintenance programmes usually thought desirable is bureaucratic support. This is often sought through formal education, for example with bilingual schools (Hornberger 2008), but can also be attempted with even younger children using the language nest (Te Kohanga Reo) model originally developed in New Zealand (King 2001). Such activities aim to increase the number of children acquiring a language; in cases where transmission of a language has broken down, other activities may be more suitable such as the Master–Apprentice model (Hinton 1997). A scheme of this sort pairs elderly speakers with younger adults to work intensively and attempt to bring the apprentice to a level of language knowledge which will enable them to teach the language to younger members of the community.

These various types of language maintenance activity certainly allow for, and indeed may need, expert linguistic knowledge. However, the kind of knowledge required may not necessarily be such as is provided by the training typical of descriptive or documentary linguists. Preparing materials for language classes and basic steps in language planning have not been the types of skills in which general linguists have been trained, but preparation for fieldwork is being rethought in light of the problem of language endangerment.

The traditional skills of a general linguist are perhaps more obviously applicable to language revival which depends to a large extent on the interpretation of historical sources documenting a language. Hebrew is generally cited as an example of what can be achieved in language revival (Fellman 1973), but that language never ceased being spoken, if only in very restricted contexts. A better example of reclamation for a language which had not been used for a considerable period is Kaurna (Amery 2000), the language formerly spoken in the area now occupied by the city of Adelaide in Australia. This language is now being used
again by a small number of people for limited functions. This was accomplished on the basis of nineteenth century linguistic materials written by German missionaries, and information from neighbouring and related languages. How linguists should view the status of such reclaimed languages is a complex question which is only beginning to be addressed (Couzens and Eira 2014); certainly they cannot be seen as straightforward continuations of the language as it formerly was spoken.

24.7 Conclusion

The evidence is clear that, even on a conservative view, language endangerment is a significant problem today. Developments in society, economics, politics and technology combined are exerting pressure toward linguistic and cultural homogeneity. If we, as linguists and as members of our species, value linguistic diversity, then some response to the situation is needed. As discussed in this chapter, linguists have made various responses to the situation. They have researched the issue and written about it, in many cases trying to raise awareness of the problems in the wider community. They have changed aspects of their practice in ways which it is hoped will ensure that the resources available, human and material, will be used as effectively as possible. And they have involved themselves in activities at the level of the ethnolinguistic community in order to attempt to sustain languages which are threatened.

The problem of language endangerment has been explicitly linked to threats to other kinds of diversity on our planet (e.g. Maffi 2005). Some scholars have developed an ecological view of language explicitly (Mühlhäusler 2003), while the views of others (e.g. Fishman) share the viewpoint implicitly. From this perspective, just as a central concern for ecologists is to ensure that habitats which support diversity are maintained, so the central concern for linguists is to ensure conditions in which linguistic diversity can exist. As Ken Hale concluded in his 1992 contribution:

While it is good and commendable to record and document fading traditions, and in some cases this is absolutely necessary to avert total loss of cultural wealth, the greater goal must be that of safeguarding diversity in the world of people.

(Hale 1992: 41)

Such a goal may not fit obviously or indeed comfortably with the practice of linguists in other times; however, if we accept that these times are different, we must rethink our role.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Alice Gaby, Nick Thieberger and Stephen Morey for comments on a draft of this chapter, and to Louisa Willoughby and Adam Schembri, who guided me to an important reference.

Notes

1 www.linguisticsociety.org/about/who-we-are/committees/endangered-languages-and-their-preservation-celp
2 There is even at least one novel which takes up some issues concerning language endangerment (Marani 2012).
Language endangerment

3 http://dobes.mpi.nl
4 www.hrelp.org
5 www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=12816
6 www.endangeredlanguages.com/about/#about_language_information
7 www-01.sil.org/iso639-3/default.asp
8 www-01.sil.org/iso639-3/changes.asp
9 The threat is not restricted to sign languages with less recognition. Improvements in genetic screening and the use of cochlear implants mean that potential speaker populations of sign languages in the first world are declining rapidly. Johnston (2004) discusses the situation of Auslan in terms of imminent endangerment.
10 Such views are expressed commonly (and more crudely) in almost any comment thread following an online article discussing threats to languages; for example: ‘The notion of preserving languages of very small groups ignores the reality that it was social isolation that lead to their very development. Maintaining languages for their own sake will only continue to reinforce social isolation’ (comment on http://theconversation.com/slip-of-the-tongues-language-and-the-unintended-consequences-of-indigenous-policy-9937, article published 3 October 2012).
11 But the language revival activities discussed in §24.6 should also be considered here as they are based on existing documentation of languages.
12 https://tla.mpi.nl
13 Despite Perley’s criticism, in general, technology has been used sensibly and sensitively in language documentation and other work supporting endangered languages (see Holton 2011).

References


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