

Real and bogus endangered languages

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In recent years, the synthetic panic surrounding endangered languages has led to the development of an intriguing split. Out in the real world, there are a large number of genuinely endangered languages, many of which are moribund. Spoken only by a small number of old people, often with few teeth and wayward enunciation, recovering their language is often difficult. These languages are not going to be revived, so the benefit of recording them can be seen as antiquarian; their value is to teach us something about the history and culture of the planet. At the next level up are very small languages; some of these are lively, simply by being spoken in very remote communities, while others are disappearing fast as the speakers assimilate to a prestige language. Although it is conceivable that this process could be reversed, it rarely is, because the benefits for outsiders of putting a great deal of energy into such a transformation are slight.

These endangered languages can be contrasted with the 'endangered' languages whose study is supported by institutions, foundations and the like, worried over in seminars by furrowed-brow academics, analysed in expensive books from venerable university presses and talked about during the course of spectacularly ill-informed radio programmes. Most of these languages may only be endangered in an extremely elastic sense of the word, but they do have qualities that endear them to institutions; convenient location and relatively large number of speakers, with some who speak an international language. It is easy to see why this is so. Since universities and other foundations became institutions whose main goal is their own propagation, they are increasingly run by hungry bureaucrats whose goal is the increase in their numbers and the consolidation of their salaries. As a consequence, some of the academics appointed to be responsible for endangered language programmes look like idiosyncratic choices to outsiders; individuals with no significant linguistics publications and no discernible interest in endangered languages. But of course they are ideal for administrators; they accept the need for slick websites, glossy brochures and their lack of experience with the reality of endangered languages means almost anything goes, in terms of expensive and useless activities.

The object is thus to acquire research that is relatively cheap but which attracts high levels of overheads. The rise in concern for endangered languages has thus come as something of a boon in a period of financial regression; it plays on a certain sentimentalism with the general public while having no threatening content. Outsiders can be manipulated into imagining that indeed the threatened languages out there are being documented and returned from the edge. One consequence of this has been a surge of interest by those in the art world; requests come in for recordings or lines of poetry in endangered languages, to be used in installations or even to be projected on the sides of buildings. The proposed function of this is 'draw attention' to the loss of languages. But this is rather like watching a cookery programme extolling the virtues of fresh food while eating a t.v. dinner. No amount of agonising by the middle classes has any real impact on language loss, only on the amount and quality of the hand-wringing.

Linguists therefore wish to perform a sort of surgery on the patient, extracting the maximum of ephemeral career points with the minimum of pain to themselves. This type of linguistics is of very limited value to the study of language, since most of it involves a type of intricate self-absorption, philosophy masquerading as empirical science. But for linguists this is not generally a matter of concern; like everyone else, they want a career path and they need to keep feeding the insatiable demand for institutional overheads. So the main reason for the choices concerning endangered languages appears to be convenience; for something smart to say in the seminar room, and future employability in the much larger world of academia. Moreover, as in other sectors, such as NGOs or international development, the administrators quickly discover that colour leaflets and websites trumpeting successes are so much cheaper and more satisfying than real achievement. Hence the expenditure of such large sums for such limited results; the old men and women go to their graves largely unrecorded and the archives will fill with largely unread theses framed by forgotten theories.