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Chapter 4

Language Ownership and Language Ideologies

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Introduction

In 2005, four representatives of the Mapuche people of Chile wrote to Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates to express “profound concerns regarding the scope of the agreement between Microsoft and the government of Chile which aims at creating a Windows operating system in our ancestral language, the Mapudungun.”¹ They asserted that “only the Mapuche People must and can safeguard, maintain, manage, develop and recreate its cultural heritage.” The Mapuche proceeded in 2006 to launch a lawsuit to block the Microsoft Mapudungun project, charging intellectual piracy. This reaction came as a shock to those who believed they were building a tool that would help the Mapuche people to maintain their language in the modern world.

Linguists who study indigenous languages of the Americas are aware that “The loss of Native American languages is directly connected to laws, policies and practices of European Americans,”² and many are eager to do what they can to counter the legacy of these practices. Most linguists agree that it is important to respect indigenous perspectives, and enthusiastically support measures such as the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People drafted by the Organization of American States in 1997,

which affirms that states must recognize and respect indigenous languages. However, since most linguists are not themselves speakers of indigenous languages, questions often arise about how (or whether) “outsider” linguists can contribute to language maintenance or revitalization efforts in a way that respects the ownership rights of the language community.

The fact that language is not a tangible object that can be located or re-located makes issues of cultural ownership more subtle but also more urgent than for concrete pieces of art or other cultural objects. More subtle because a language can in principle be spoken by many people in different places, so it would seem that using a language in, say, Redmond Washington would not impinge on rights of speakers in Chile. More urgent, however, because a dominant culture can affect a language even across large distances, and a community that has lost their language cannot simply petition to get it back.

This paper discusses issues of ownership and community empowerment that arise when academic linguists work with communities whose languages are in danger of dying out. I begin by talking about the importance of these issues to language revitalization efforts and the power imbalances that can arise when linguists try to lend their expertise. Then I describe my own experience as co-author of a textbook of Navajo, which taught me lessons about the limits of my expertise. Finally, I touch on the topic of language attitudes and ideologies, suggesting that the relevant divide is not so much between western and non-western ideologies as between the recent discoveries of linguistics and the language experience of non-linguists.

Language ownership and community empowerment

Issues of language ownership and community empowerment are important to an increasing number of linguists who are concerned about the erosion and disappearance many of the world's languages.³ Krauss⁴ estimated that if current conditions continue, over half of the world's languages could be extinct by 2092. Believing that "the world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used,"⁵ the community of academic linguists has established several organizations devoted to endangered languages, including a major funding initiative through the National Science Foundation. UNESCO conferences in 2003 and 2009 have affirmed that "There is an imperative need for language documentation, new policy initiatives, and new materials to enhance the vitality of these languages."⁶ The 2003 UNESCO working group adds, "There is a pressing need to build support for language communities in their efforts to establish meaningful new roles for their endangered languages."⁷ Some linguists argue that documentation of endangered languages should take priority over all other research. Others continue theoretical research but are eager to give back to the communities in which they do their work by creating materials that will be useful for documentation or pedagogy. However, Hill⁸ eloquently discusses how much of the recent academic literature on endangered languages is at odds with community views on language ownership.

Most linguists who work on indigenous languages of the Americas (and other endangered languages worldwide) would now agree that when working in a speech community "priority

must be given to a community-based approach and to long term capacity building and support at the most local level.”⁹ The public archive for Australian Aboriginal material explains that “Many speakers of endangered languages consider that their language is their intellectual property, passed down to them from their ancestors. If it is made freely available to others, then their rights in that language can be diminished. Usually they do not want strangers to use words and sentences of their languages in an inappropriate way, and want to be consulted prior to public use.”¹⁰ This view of language would seem to contrast with the view expressed by linguist Geoff Pullum: “A language is not something that could be or should be controlled by a people or its political leadership, and making software available in a certain writing system or language is not a threat to, or a theft of, cultural patrimony.”¹¹

At the heart of this contrast is the difference between the way that linguists view language in general and the way that a speaker views his or her own language.¹² Keren Rice aptly summarizes this difference when she characterizes the linguist’s view of language as “objects of beauty and awe,”¹³ and then quotes a statement by the Assembly of First Nations in which they say “...Our languages are the cornerstone of who we are as people. Without our languages, our cultures cannot survive.”¹⁴ As Jane Simpson points out in a blog post, “Bound up with language as property are the ideas of **respect for ownership**, and **denial of access to the language** [emphasis in original]. Respect seems to matter to speakers of many small languages, regardless of how strong the language is. It's their language; they have the right to say how it's spelled, what the words of the language are, when and where it's used in public.”¹⁵ For “outsider” linguists committed to academic freedom, respect for ownership rights can come into conflict with strongly held views about the importance of free access to intellectual property. However, the concept of ownership with respect to language has more to do with ethical

responsibility and personal relationships than with legal property rights. Many linguists believe that making language materials widely available is “not a threat to, or a theft of, cultural patrimony” but nonetheless refrain from doing so out of respect for the beliefs of the community they work with. Moreover, when linguists are working on a language that they do not speak, they are dependent on speakers of the language for the knowledge upon which their research depends. When a group like the Mapuche say that only they can safeguard, maintain and develop their language, they mean that any uses of the language outside of the community of speakers are based at best on partial knowledge, and so they have the right, and even the responsibility, to be consulted by anyone who plans to produce a product and call it Mapudungun.

Academic linguists often go into the field assuming that a well-meaning eagerness to respect the views of everyone will be enough to direct them toward work that will be useful to the people whose language they study. Most linguists these days are eager to avoid exploitative relationships with the people they work with, and to reject research models in which “People are treated as ‘data generators,’ and little attention is paid to their needs or desires.”¹⁶ They are aware that many cases of language endangerment are the direct result of policies and attitudes of the dominant culture toward indigenous languages, and do not want to repeat the atrocities of the past. Programs have been developed to address “the issues of power inequalities that arise when members external to the language community engage in linguistic projects,”¹⁷ and a number of papers exhort linguists to move beyond linguist-centered models of research and toward “initiative(s) from within the community, relying on internal resources, and with minimal input from outside advisers”—in other words, “schemes [that] can be self-sustaining given sufficient motivation.”¹⁸ There are some success stories involving partnerships between linguists and

language activists within speech communities, as well as cases where efforts that are entirely community-based have been encouraged or aided by linguists.¹⁹ However, currently there are more accounts of pitfalls, problems and warnings that power imbalances and mismatched goals can engender “anger, resentment, volatile feelings of being ripped off because the researcher, like the Colonialists, has taken what they wanted but not lived up to the community’s expectations of continuity and reciprocity.”²⁰ This gap between linguists’ ideals and current reality is attributed by linguists to factors such as differences in language ideologies that are “grounded in the social distribution of both indigenous social inequality and the differential impact of colonial and postcolonial contact experiences,”²¹ the need for “a deliberate, focused effort to rethink paradigms or research and Western methodologies”²² and the fact that “The ambiguity and manipulation in Navajo-Anglo relations promote misunderstanding and mistrust, of motive and message.”²³

Ultimately, it is clear that “In order to be successful, a revitalization program must be driven by the community of people who do or will use the language.”²⁴ This means that there are obvious limits on the role to be played by outsider linguists, which means that it is not unusual for there to be at least some community members who feel that linguists could help most by leaving them alone. More often, community members are glad to have people who are eager to help, but the help that linguists offer is not the help for which the community feels the most need. This, of course, is the history of contact between helpful Euro-Americans and Native Americans, in a nutshell. Helpful outsiders decide what Native communities need – boarding schools, haircuts, a “civilized” language, a “civilized” religion – and proceed to empower them to get these things, hearing nothing of what the people say they actually need.

In the case of language revitalization, however, there is a fundamental power imbalance that is rarely mentioned in the literature on empowerment models of research. It is the imbalance that comes from the fact that outsider linguists simply do not have the power to create a new generation of speakers. No matter how much linguists set aside research on “arcane matters” that have “minimal application”²⁵ in favor of community-oriented work, and no matter how successful linguists are at rethinking paradigms and overcoming their neocolonialist tendencies, the success of any language revitalization program crucially depends on the extent to which a community’s families insist that their children hear and acquire the language. This power imbalance means that linguists who are eager to help will almost always risk providing something that does not meet the community’s core needs. I do not mean to say that language endangerment is the “fault” of communities. And there are plenty of situations where a community decides on goals other than total fluency of the next generation, and finds skills in language documentation useful. Rather, I want to suggest that linguists must recognize that communities and not linguists have the power over the central factor in language revitalization. It’s not just that we must empower communities, it’s that we must recognize the limits of our own power.

Recognizing this power imbalance is a key to overcoming the gap between linguists and speech communities that Rice calls “two solitudes.” Rice concludes that there need not be two solitudes “if there is mutual recognition that a linguist cannot on their own save a language...”²⁶ This does not mean that linguists should ignore the needs of the people they work with or go back to the “helicopter” model of research. On the contrary, it means that it is not up to us to decide among ourselves what kind of help a community needs, nor is it up to us to “rais[e] community awareness about the impact of colonial and hegemonic language ideologies on local

thinking about language and communication”²⁷ or to “convince the community that there is a problem of language loss, that the responsibility lies with the community...”²⁸ It means that linguists cannot decide in advance what will be needed or even if language revitalization is advisable. Field and Kroskrity note that “American Indian language ideologies not only are historically very different from each other, but today, *even within a single community* (emphasis in original) are typically complex, heterogeneous, contradictory and even contentious.”²⁹ Moreover, as Dobrin points out, linguists also cannot decide in advance that they should just stand back and withdraw from the community. She describes her experience in Papua New Guinea, where village leaders taught her that “the outside acknowledgment I provided was precisely what was needed for a community- wide language project they were engaged in to succeed.”³⁰ Finally linguists should not be surprised to find that their most valuable contributions are non-linguistic.

On being co-author of a Navajo textbook.

My own involvement has been with the Navajo language. It began when I was a student at the University of Arizona, and had a linguistics professor who was a Navajo speaker. I went on to study for my Ph.D. with Dr. Ken Hale at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dr. Hale was renowned for his research on understudied languages and for his dedication to providing the speakers of these languages with the training to carry out their own research. In the interest of full disclosure, I should say that I was trained essentially as a theoretical linguist/cognitive scientist, and my research on Navajo would be characterized by some as arcane. I cannot claim to be a specialist in language documentation, or to have had a commendable level of involvement with the community outside of the community of Navajo

linguists and educators. However, I was inspired by Dr. Hale's exhortations to give back to the communities whose languages we study. The extent to which I have done so is decidedly meager compared to many other linguists, but I have tried to do what I could.

Many speakers of Navajo are concerned that the survival of their language is threatened. Like many other groups, they were subjected to the destructive boarding school experience, where they were punished for speaking Navajo. With the high rates of unemployment and poverty on the Navajo reservation, it is not surprising that the majority of families see English as the language of power, necessary for success. Navajo still has perhaps 178,000 speakers.³¹ There exists an extensive dictionary and grammar of Navajo³² and bilingual programs have existed on the Navajo reservation since the 1960s. However, Platero³³ finds that the number of children who speak Navajo is declining rapidly. With considerable community interest in the Navajo language and even several Navajo speakers with Ph.D.s in linguistics, it is still not clear that the language will survive into the next century.

From 2004 to 2008 I worked with a Navajo educator to co-author a textbook³⁴ for teaching Navajo at the high school and college level. In this section I would like to discuss some ways in which this experience illustrates some of the issues of power, ownership and listening that outsider linguists need to deal with. First I will briefly explain my role as co-author and some of the issues of power that arose, and then I will talk a bit about the book itself, which is quite different from the kind of textbook that a linguist would write.

The primary author for the textbook was Dr. Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie, who grew up on the Navajo reservation, earned a doctorate in education and is currently a professor at Northern Arizona University. She has been teaching Navajo for over 20 years. After she had worked with me on linguistics projects for a number of years, Dr. Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie asked me to

work with her on an introductory Navajo textbook based on her college-level curriculum. She asked me to work with her because she thought that I could explain basic grammar concepts without getting bogged down in too much linguistic detail. My role was to explain a few important grammar concepts in a way that is accessible to high school or college students and to help with prose editing and continuity.

Many people assume that if a Navajo and a European-American are co-authors, the Euro-American must be the “real” author, with the Navajo being some kind of assistant. We found that people would sometimes persist in this belief even after being told that Dr. Parsons-Yazzie is the primary author. In part this reflects the prejudice that minority scholars routinely encounter. Even when the actual authorship was known, I was accorded what I call “gratuitous prestige.” People would assume that a book written with a professional linguist must be of a higher quality than one written solely by a Navajo. The pervasiveness of this kind of prejudice is not news to any member of a minority group, but it is worth mentioning, because for reasons I will outline below the resulting book could not possibly have been written by a non-Navajo academic linguist. Dr. Parsons-Yazzie wrote the book to reflect the voice of Navajo elders, or of a Navajo parent teaching a child, using personal examples, repetition of important concepts, and admonitions to students. Numerous times our editor wanted to revise the text into a more “neutral” (=non-Navajo) style. One of my contributions to the project was to act as a go-between in working with the editor. This was necessary because the editor accorded me gratuitous prestige, and would hear explanations of the style when they came from me rather than from her. I know next to nothing myself about the speaking style of Navajo elders and parents and so I was simply repeating her words, which they did not hear when they came from her.

The assumptions that some people made about my role in the book also reflect the fact that when outsider linguists co-author books or papers with speakers of endangered languages, the research agenda is virtually always set by the linguist. Even if the project is a grammar, dictionary or other non-theoretical work, the outsider linguist is almost always the one who decides on the topics, organization and voice for the work. Of course there is nothing wrong with this when a community asks a linguist to produce a dictionary or grammar for them. Presumably the community expects the linguist to advise them on the appropriate topics and organization. They may even expect and need the “expert’s” gratuitous prestige.³⁵ However, before I became involved in this textbook, it had never occurred to me how rare it is to find a collaboration where the community member rather than the linguist really controls the intellectual agenda.

Dr. Parsons-Yazzie’s and my textbook is different in many ways from the kind of book that a linguist would write. It has been extremely well-received, and I believe that this is *because* it was conceived, organized and written by a non-linguist, who knew the community thoroughly. I’d like to discuss just a few of the ways in which the book is unlike one that someone like me would have or could have designed.

First of all, as a linguist I believe that the most important thing about learning a language is learning to speak. I am not at all concerned with whether the learner has a non-native accent. Dr. Parsons-Yazzie designed her curriculum with the first two lessons (spanning a minimum of four weeks) devoted entirely to the Navajo alphabet and phonemes. This is shocking to most linguists, who would generally explain the sound system within a few pages and then move on. For example, Slate reports that when he first team-taught a class with Navajo scholar and teacher Tony Goldtooth,

”...I insisted that from the first, in the reading and writing courses...we use entirely whole-language activities, eschewing Goldtooth’s tried-and-true phonics coverage...Thereafter, throughout the program, some students had difficulty with [certain features of pronunciation and writing].³⁶

Slate attributes his error to being “caught up in the controversy of whole language versus phonics.” and advises that we learn to “see beyond such false oppositions.” As I see it, the problem is not one of being caught up in a theory; it is a problem of failing to listen to the person who best knows the audience. As Dr. Parsons-Yazzie explained to me, Navajo elders emphasize how important they feel it is for learners to pronounce Navajo correctly. She knew how important it was for the community that the textbook reflect and respect the attitudes of Navajo elders. Moreover, most high school and college level Navajo classes combine students who have little to no exposure to Navajo with students who have heard Navajo and may even speak quite a bit but can’t write Navajo. Those who have no experience with the way colloquial Navajo is pronounced often have an easier time learning the writing system, because they have not heard how the sounds actually blend together in casual speech. This can be very discouraging for the Navajo speakers. Spending a substantial amount of time on the sound system at the beginning of the course gives the Navajo speakers a chance to get used to the writing system and it gives the non-speakers a chance to learn from the students who already can pronounce the Navajo phonemes.

Secondly, a linguist would be likely to organize a textbook in terms of linguistic structure rather than conceptual topics, and would include information on culture as a supplement to the language lessons rather than as a basis for them. Language teachers who are not linguists are more likely to organize material around themes like clothing, weather, food, etc. One important

goal of our textbook was to teach Navajo culture as a living set of values rather than a list of foods, clothing and customs or a description of traditional ceremonies and beliefs. A substantial number of Navajo parents who are Christian are very wary of allowing their children to take Navajo classes, because they worry that culture lessons will teach traditional Navajo religion. Organizing the lessons according to conceptual topics made it clear how many facets there are to Navajo culture that can be made relevant to young people today. For example, the chapter about clothing begins with the story of an elder that Dr. Parsons-Yazzie interviewed, in which the elder talks about the contrast between the attitudes people had toward clothing when she was young and the attitudes today. The chapters on family and kinship discuss the role that each family member plays in the upbringing of a child, and the chapter on the body includes information about Navajo views of health. Dr. Parsons-Yazzie worked with Navajo elders on all chapters. As mentioned above, she tried to write the culture sections to sound like a Navajo elder or mother teaching.

Third, linguists are analytical and interested in discovering generalizations. My preference as a linguist would be to explain grammar points once and expect students to discover how the grammar patterns apply to new examples. This is not the approach that Dr. Parsons-Yazzie believes to be the most effective with her students. Ash, Little Doe Fermino and Hale³⁷ report similar experiences in constructing Wampanoag language materials. Little Doe Fermino's Wampanoag students did not find it helpful to analyze verbal paradigms or syntactic structure. Parsons-Yazzie designed the Navajo textbook to reflect a Navajo teaching style, which includes repetitions of important points and emphasizes observation rather than generalization. I have to admit that it was sometimes difficult for me to hear her when she explained that my succinct analytical explanations were not appropriate for the book's audience. It was hard for me to

imagine the importance of reinforcing the material in a way her students found comfortable, rather than revealing what I thought of as the fascinating patterns of the language. I also will confess that I was anxious about what my linguistics colleagues would think about a book that does not conform to their conception of the linguistically-informed language textbook. But since Dr. Parsons-Yazzie's knows her audience and I do not, the resulting book is one that is highly accessible to Navajo young people.

One final property of the book that a linguist would not have paid attention to is its graphic design and production value. Linguists are not noted for their refined sense of style, and we generally would assume that excellence in a book comes solely from its content. Dr. Parsons-Yazzie knew that it was important that the book look elegant. We had a Navajo graphic designer, who laid out the pages so that the material looks approachable and attractive. In the end, the fact that the book looks like a "real" book on a valued language is one of the things that Navajo students appreciate the most.

Dr. Parsons-Yazzie believes that the book was enhanced by my expertise and analytical tendencies, and I think I was helpful in negotiating with the editors. But the real basis of the book's success was her ability to keep me aware that I did not have the power to convey her language to young people in a meaningful way. I do not mean to advocate that linguists should withhold their expertise or abandon their convictions about language. I just mean to say that if we truly want to be helpful to someone with a goal of stabilizing their language, we have to keep in mind that our expertise just may not be what a community really needs. In the following section I would like to take a look at some of the ways that linguists' knowledge, while true, can come up against the real world situations that communities find themselves in.

Linguists, language analysis and language learning

Linguists have a very specialized training in the analysis of language and are generally fascinated by languages, but as discussed above,³⁸ it is not clear that their skills are the skills that a community needs for revitalizing a language. Linguists are interested in what all languages have in common and in what the properties of language can tell us about how the human brain works. Linguists are often very good at taking language apart and putting it back together, but just as you can be an excellent driver without knowing how your car's engine works, you can be an excellent language teacher without knowing how to do a linguistic analysis.

In fact, the knowledge and perspective that one gets on language from studying it linguistically leads to a view of language that is at odds with the view of society in general. For example, most Americans believe that casual speech is illogical and disregards rules. Linguists who have studied casual speech carefully find that in fact even casual speech is an instantiation of a complex system of linguistic patterns. Another example is that most Americans believe that bringing a child up bilingual will cause him to have special trouble learning the dominant language. In fact, studies of bilingual children whose educational opportunities are not hampered by poverty and the like show that bilingual children do better than monolinguals on virtually all tests of cognitive skills. The average undergraduate comes into Linguistics 101 holding these misconceptions about language, and linguists see it as their job to teach them the truth.

This point is important because discussions of the gap between linguists and language communities often include warnings such as “Academic language ideology may also have negative consequences for language revitalization efforts,”³⁹ and go on to suggest, “This attempt to disclose the language ideologies of the research in order to better understand indigenous

ideologies suggests an important contribution of a language ideological approach for those searching for a ‘decolonizing methodology’ for conducting linguistic research in indigenous communities.”⁴⁰ But the ideology that “may have negative consequences” is not specifically a “colonizing ideology,” as I am reminded each fall by the undergraduate students in Linguistics 101. Since the ideology of linguists is in some ways quite distinct from that of American society as a whole, linguists are susceptible to believing that their ideology counts as a decolonizing one, and be at a loss when community members explain that they plan to bring up their child speaking English so she will not have trouble in school.

Most linguists are trained as cognitive scientists, and are more skilled at discovering mechanics than driving. I do not mean to say that what linguists do actually is misguided or useless. On the contrary, I have spent my life as a linguist because I think that linguistic analysis has led to fascinating insight about the human mind. I also think it is important not to assume that people with an “indigenous ideology” can never be interested in theoretical linguistics. My mentor Dr. Hale spent his life training speakers of indigenous languages to be linguists. He didn’t think you had to be a linguist to pass on your language. He just found that there are people in every community who are interested in linguistics, and he believed that the knowledge he had shouldn’t be held as esoteric knowledge that only Anglos can have. In fact, as I mentioned above, one of my first linguistics professors was Navajo. Most people in Western culture aren’t inherently interested in linguistic analysis and do not find it natural to pull languages apart. I find that in any group there may be some people who become fascinated with linguistics, and others who don’t. It’s just that learning to speak a language does not depend on conscious knowledge of grammar and linguistic analysis. As Blackfoot educator Kipp⁴¹ puts it, “The most sophisticated computer program cannot mimic the genius of a child speaking their

tribal language.” His experience with efforts to revitalize the Blackfoot language has taught him that the “basic formula” is “a room, a teacher and some children.”

I would like to look in a bit more detail at some of the views that linguists have found to be misconceptions about language. I think it is worthwhile to look at the grain of truth behind each of these misconceptions, in order to clarify the relationship between linguists and the communities they work with.

To begin the discussion, we can look at two roundtables on Stabilizing Indigenous Languages held in 1994 and 1995. I assume that these symposia were quite productive and successful, judging by the interesting papers collected in the proceedings⁴² and many interesting talks at SIL conferences over the subsequent years. These meetings raised issues that have been echoed in numerous other conferences, such as the UNESCO conferences on Indigenous Languages in 2003 and 2009. According to proceedings editor Cantoni, the symposia identified barriers to language revitalization, such as the perception that English is a better vehicle for success, teachers’ criticism of those who speak minority language at home and the tendency to teach isolated vocabulary items instead of complete language. In addition, the participants identified some “widespread misconceptions”⁴³ that impede language revitalization efforts, including the following:

- You have to give up your own language in order to master another one.
- You need special training to teach your own language to your children.
- Schools can take over the job of teaching a language if families do not teach it.
- Writing a language is what keeps it alive.

Most linguists would agree that these are misconceptions, and that they impede efforts to stabilize endangered languages. Linguistic research leads to the conclusion that

- Children can easily learn two languages if both are spoken around them as they are growing up. Bilingual children are superior to monolinguals in many cognitive tasks, and by about age 9 are completely equivalent to monolingual children in their skills in the school language
- Children learn language naturally, without special instruction, just by hearing it spoken around them.
- By age 12, which is when most schools begin teaching second languages, children are already beyond the “critical period” for naturally learning languages.
- Spoken languages are living languages and writing is not essential for keeping a language alive.

The viewpoint that results from studying language as a linguist is at odds with the usual viewpoint of the general public. Helpful linguists are often very earnest in trying to inform the public (or at least the population of their college classes) of the truth as they see it. This dedication to clearing up popular “misconceptions” leads to a conflict when the linguist goes to into another community to help with language issues. Naturally, people in Native communities often hold some of the same ideas about language and bilingualism as the general Anglo population, along with their own culture-specific views about their own languages. This means that the helpful well-meaning linguist may see her task as one of disabusing members of Native communities of their “misconceptions” about language and sharing the truth with them.

Even though I hold the views of the average linguist, I would like to address the question of whether it is actually helpful to zealously correct the “misconceptions” of speakers of endangered languages. I think that it is important for us outsider linguists to remind ourselves of

why these misconceptions are so widespread, and consider how the grain of truth within them is relevant to the role of linguists in language stabilization efforts.

A closer look at misconceptions about language

The first common misconceptions that I would like to look at are those having to do with bilingualism. As noted above, it is popularly believed in America that a child who is brought up bilingual will be behind her monolingual peers in school, will be confused by input from two languages and may have trouble achieving proficiency in any one language. For this reason, it is not uncommon for parents who speak a minority language to decide to bring up their children speaking the majority language.

Linguists know that studies of bilingual children tell a different story. For example, a recent University of Miami study of Spanish/English bilingual children Pearson⁴⁴ found that bilingual first graders have a larger vocabulary than monolingual first graders, by fifth grade, bilinguals' English reading test scores were no different from those of monolinguals, and bilingual children are better than monolinguals in cognitive tasks involving metalinguistic awareness, divergent thinking and selective attention. In fact, Pearson reports that to her knowledge there exist no non-linguistic cognitive tests in which bilinguals do worse than monolinguals. Doesn't this mean that there is a pressing need for linguists to disabuse speakers of endangered languages of their misconceptions, so that they will bring up their children as bilinguals?

Maybe there would be in a world where speakers of minority languages were not socially stigmatized and school systems waited until fifth grade to give children language tests. In the real world, bilingual parents in America know that school systems care only about English skills, and minority languages are not widely valued. Their children will be tested in kindergarten or

first grade, and their knowledge of the home language will be generally ignored. A six year old who knows 16,000 words, 8000 of English and 8000 of Navajo, will be treated as “behind” a monolingual child who knows 10,000 words of English.⁴⁵ The child will be given special English language instruction, and will be expected to be behind in other subjects. It is well-known that teachers’ expectations have a significant effect on performance. Children’s attitudes toward their own abilities and teachers’ attitudes toward the children are formed well before fifth grade. A child could be treated as “deficient” based on her first grade scores, and this could have an irreversible effect. Parents are not deluded to worry about the effects of bringing their child up bilingual. It takes a very strong parent with ample time to advocate for her children to counteract these effects.

Related to this is the misconception that you need special training to teach your language to your child. It can be very frustrating to a linguist to observe that some parents come to them hoping for training that will help them pass along their language, when the linguist knows that linguistic training will not help. How can parents expect linguists to help them if they aren’t speaking the language with their own children? But as with the issue of bilingualism, the desire for training comes from the real world pressures that make it extremely difficult to construct the environment for natural language learning. Many of these pressures are clearly explained by McCarty et al.⁴⁶ Children are bombarded by messages that the dominant language is the language of power. Moreover, if their friends don’t speak the heritage language, then it isn’t cool, and they risk humiliation if they speak it. Often parents will try to bring up children speaking the heritage language, only to find the children answering back in the dominant language. McCarty et al. found that the level of proficiency among Navajo children seemed to be higher than the level they displayed in public. They conclude that these factors lead to a loss of

opportunities for children and adults to interact naturally in Navajo. It is far from a misconception to hope for some training that could teach you how to deal with this kind of situation.

Since many families do not find themselves in a situation where natural acquisition of the heritage language is possible, some communities put energy into developing curricula for middle school, high school and college age students, who may be realizing that their parent's language has value that they hadn't recognized when they were younger. Linguists may worry that the community fails to understand that language learning should not be put until middle school. But chances are the community is well aware of the home situations of its children during the "critical period" years, and developing this kind of curriculum may be the best choice that is practical for them.

Finally, the issue of writing is complex, and community views are widely disparate. Some communities prefer not to write their language and others feel that writing is crucial. Linguists may worry that focusing on writing diverts energy from the enterprise of bringing up fluent speakers of the language. But given that the dominant culture clearly holds writing of their own language to be a crucial component of education, we should expect strong views among speakers of an endangered language.

The point is that clearing up misconceptions may not be the best task for an outsider linguist who wants to be helpful to a community. For linguists like me who are not trained in writing dictionaries, collecting texts or developing pedagogical materials, this might mean that imparting our central area of expertise is not the most helpful thing we can do. As Mithun points out, "Where language use is widespread and vigorous, it is natural to follow the interests of both the speakers and the fieldworker. Where the speech community is fragile, however, time with

skilled speakers is a finite resource.”⁴⁷ This point echoes suggestions by Gerdts⁴⁸, Grinevald⁴⁹ and Rice⁵⁰, among others, who offer suggestions of other tasks that linguists might take on, such as helping to secure funding, acting as a liaison between communities and Universities, acting as an advocate for the language, soliciting donations of needed supplies and arranging access to media. Being helpful to a community also means accepting the community’s views about what will constitute “success” of a program. There are many vibrant programs within communities today that may never result in large numbers of children learning the language fluently, but may be enormously successful in reinforcing the community’s values in a world where their children face prejudice and economic disadvantage.

As long as linguists restrict what they are willing to do to things that directly involve their linguistic expertise, they are extremely likely to be doing what *they* think the community needs rather than what community members say they actually need. In retrospect, I think that the things that have made me most useful as an outsider have been independent of my linguistic wisdom. For example, one summer I babysat for a woman who was working as a consultant for me so that she could have time to pursue her own studies. I volunteered to be treasurer of the Navajo Language Academy, which organizes summer workshops for Navajo bilingual teachers. With me doing bookkeeping and paperwork, the Navajo speakers can have time for their own language work.⁵¹ People from the dominant culture have resources that might be more valuable than their linguistic expertise. We have access to people who would not listen to people from a stigmatized group. We have experience in expressing ourselves in the way that grant panels, college professors, legislators and school principals expect. We have jobs that allow us a significant amount of freedom to dictate our own activities. These things are at least as valuable as our knowledge about the true nature of human language. They put us in a position to clear up the

misconceptions about endangered languages in our own culture, to work for change in the role of testing in schools, to seek grant resources for community members and to take on tasks that community members want but do not have the time or resources to do, such as getting coffee for meetings, bookkeeping, lobbying legislators, finding materials and supplies, setting up archives, mailing out flyers.

Conclusions

Over the past 20 years an increasing number of linguists have become interested in contributing to language revitalization efforts and have been trying to avoid destructive ways of interacting with speakers of endangered languages and to address (or at least acknowledge) the power imbalances that arise when outsiders try to be “helpful” to a minority community. My own experience suggests that as we train the next generation of linguists it is important to teach them that one key power imbalance is that they simply do not have the power to pass along someone else’s language. Because of this imbalance, what they have to offer to the communities they work with might not involve “clearing up misconceptions” or even developing materials that make direct use of their training as linguists. It is clear to all who work on endangered languages that only community-based projects have any hope of success, and linguists who are committed to language revitalization must be willing to do those things that communities decide they need, rather than telling communities what is needed. Hinton⁵² gives very useful advice about language planning that can be used by community members on their own, but which is also a good blueprint for a linguist going into a community, because it lays a framework for the community to articulate goals, which the linguist should then listen to. Fortunately, as Ash, Little Doe Fermino and Hale say, “There is reason for optimism because local language

communities all over the world are taking it upon themselves to act on behalf of their imperiled linguistic traditions in full understanding of, and in spite of, the realistic perception that the cards are stacked against them.”⁵³

¹ Letter of August 12, 2005, <http://www.mapuche.info/mapu/ctt050812.html>.

² Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer. 1998. “Technical, emotional and ideological issues in reversing language shift: examples from Southeast Alaska,” in *Endangered Languages: Language Loss and Community Response*, Lenore Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998) 57-98.

³ For one study that particularly addresses issues of ownership, see Judith Maxwell, “Ownership of Indigenous Languages: A Case Study from Guatemala,” in *Indigenous Intellectual Property Rights: Legal Obstacles and Innovative Solutions*, Riley, ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press 2004).

⁴ Michael Krauss, “The world’s languages in crisis” *Language* 68.1 (1992) 4-10.

⁵ Leanne Hinton. “Language Revitalization: An Overview” in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*. ed. Leanne Hinton and Kenneth Hale (New York: Academic Press 2001), 5.

⁶ “Language Vitality and Endangerment.” UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, Document submitted to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages, Paris, 10–12 March 2003.

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf>.

⁷ UNESCO, “Language Vitality and Endangerment.”

⁸ Jane Hill, "'Expert Rhetorics' in Advocacy for Endangered Languages: Who Is Listening, and What Do They Hear?" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. 12.2 (2002), 119-133.

⁹ I. W. Arka, "Local autonomy, local capacity building and support for minority languages: Field experiences from Indonesia," *Language Documentation & Conservation Special Publication No. 1* (2008), 66.

¹⁰ <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/ASEDA/faq.html#manage>

¹¹ Geoff Pullum, blog post on Language Log <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageblog/archives/003820.html>. 11/24/06.

¹² For an excellent exploration of these issues within the Northern Athabaskan community of Kaska speakers, see Barbara A. Meek, *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press 2010).

¹³ Keren Rice, "Must there be two solitudes? Language Activists and Linguists Working Together." in *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance & Lessons Learned*. ed. Jon Reyhner and Louise Lockard. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University College of Education (2009): 37-60.

¹⁴ Rice, "Must there be two solitudes?" 41.

¹⁵ Jane Simpson, "Sovereignty over languages and land." Posted on *Transient Languages and Cultures*. http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/elac/2006/11/sovereignty_over_languages_and_1.html, (2006).

¹⁶ Raquel-Maria Yamada. "Collaborative Linguistic Fieldwork: Practical Application of the Empowerment Model" *Language Documentation and Conservation*, 1.2 (2007), 258.

¹⁷ Elena Benedicto, “Participative Research: The Role of the Linguist in the Development of Local Researchers.” ms. Purdue University (2008).

¹⁸ Lise Dobrin. “From linguistic elicitation to eliciting the linguist: Lessons in community empowerment from Melanesia.” *Language* 84.2. (2008)120. (quoting linguist Geoff Smith) See also Deborah Cameron et al. *Researching language: Issues of power and method*. London: Routledge. (1992); Deborah Cameron et al. “Ethics, advocacy and empowerment in researching language.” in *Sociolinguistics: A reader and coursebook*, ed. Nikolas Coupland and Adam Jaworski (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 1997), 145–162; Eva Czaykowska-Higgins. “Research models in linguistics: Reflections on working with Canadian indigenous communities.” Unpublished Manuscript, University of British Columbia. (2007); Collette Grinevald, “Language endangerment in South America: A programmatic approach.” in *Endangered languages: Language loss and community response*. ed. Lenore Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998): 124-159.; Marianne Mithun, “Who shapes the record: the speaker and the linguist.” In *Linguistic fieldwork*, ed. Paul Newman and Martha Ratliff, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001); Keren Rice, “Ethical issues in linguistic fieldwork: An overview,” *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 4, (2006),123-155; Clay Slate. “Promoting Advanced Navajo Language Scholarship,” in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*. ed. Hinton and Hale, (New York: Academic Press 2001), among others.

¹⁹ See in particular the accounts in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*. ed. Leanne Hinton and Kenneth Hale.

²⁰ Raquel-Maria Yamada. “Collaborative Linguistic Fieldwork”

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- ²¹ Margaret Field and Paul Kroskrity. "Introduction: Revealing Native American Ideologies." in *Native American Language Ideologies: Beliefs, Practices and Struggles in Indian Country*. ed. Paul Kroskrity and Margaret Field, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 2008), 6.
- ²² Lenore Grenoble "Linguistic Cages and the Limits of Linguists. in *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance & Lessons Learned*. ed. Reyhner and Lockard, 61.
- ²³ Clay Slate. "Promoting Advanced Navajo Language Scholarship." in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*, ed. Hinton and Hale, 389.
- ²⁴ Lenore Grenoble "Linguistic Cages and the Limits of Linguists. 64.
- ²⁵ Clay Slate. "Promoting Advanced Navajo Language Scholarship," 389.
- ²⁶ Keren Rice. "Must there be two solitudes?"
- ²⁷ Christopher Loether. "Language Revitalization and the Manipulation of Language Ideologies: A Shoshoni Case Study." in *Native American Language Ideologies*, ed. Kroskrity and Field, 239.
- ²⁸ H.P. Valiquette, H.P., "Community, professionals, and language preservation: First things first," in *Endangered languages—What role for the specialist?* ed. Nicholas Ostler, (Bath, England: Foundation for Endangered Languages, 1998), 107-112, cited in Rice "Must there be two solitudes," 48.
- ²⁹ Field and Kroskrity. "Introduction," 6.
- ³⁰ Lise Dobrin, "From linguistic elicitation to eliciting the linguist: Lessons in community empowerment from Melanesia," *Language* 84.2. (2008), 310.
- ³¹ AnCita Benally and Denis Vin, "*Diné Bizaad* (Navajo Language) at a crossroads: Extinction or renewal?" *Bilingual Research Journal* 29:85-108, (2005). Cited in Teresa McCarty, Mary Eunice Romero-Little and Ofelia Zepeda. "Indigenous Language Policies in Social Practice: The Case of Navajo." in *Sustaining Linguistic Diversity : Endangered and Minority Languages and*

Language Varieties. ed. Kendall King, A. Fogle, Lyn Wright and Natalie Schilling-Estes. (Washington, D.C. : Georgetown University Press 2008).

³² Robert Young and William Morgan, *The Navajo Language*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 1987).

³³ Paul Platero. "Navajo Head-Start Language Study." in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*. ed. Hinton and Hale, 87-100.

³⁴ Evangeline Parsons Yazzie and Margaret Speas. *Diné Bizaad Bínahoo 'aah (Rediscovering the Navajo Language)*, (Flagstaff: Salina Bookshelf, 2008).

³⁵ See Lise Dobrin. "From linguistic elicitation to eliciting the linguist.

³⁶ Clay Slate, "Promoting Advanced Navajo Language Scholarship," 395.

³⁷ Anna Ash, Jessie Little Doe Fermino and Ken Hale, "Diversity in Local Language Maintenance and Restoration: A Reason for Optimism," in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization*, eds. Hinton and Hale.

³⁸ See also Rice. "Must there be two solitudes?" 37-60; Donna Gerdt, "The linguist in language revitalization programmes," In *Endangered languages – What role for the specialist?* ed. Ostler, 13-22; Lenore Grenoble "Linguistic Cages and the Limits of Linguists. in *Indigenous Language Revitalization*."

³⁹ Field and Kroskrity. "Introduction," 25.

⁴⁰ Field and Kroskrity. "Introduction," 26.

⁴¹ Darryl Kipp, "Encouragement, Guidance and Lessons Learned: 21 Years in an Immersion School," in *Indigenous Language Revitalization*," ed. Reyhner and Lockard, 2.

⁴² Gina Cantoni. *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages*, (Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University College of Education 1996).

⁴³ Cantoni, *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages*, vii.

⁴⁴ Barbara Pearson, *Raising a Bilingual Child*. (New York: Living Languages Publisher 2008).

⁴⁵ see Clay Slate. "Promoting Advanced Navajo Language Scholarship."

⁴⁶ McCarty, Romero-Little and Zepeda. "Indigenous Language Policies in Social Practice."

⁴⁷ Marianne Mithun, "Who shapes the record: the speaker and the linguist." In *Linguistic fieldwork*, ed. Paul Newman and Martha Ratliff, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 34.

⁴⁸ Donna Gerds, "The linguist in language revitalization programmes."

⁴⁹ Collette Grinevald, "Language endangerment in South America."

⁵⁰ Keren Rice, "Must there be two solitudes?"

⁵¹ Some information on the Navajo Language Academy can be found in Margaret Speas.

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⁵² Leanne Hinton. "Language Planning." in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*, 51.

⁵³ Ash, Little Doe Fermino and Hale. "Diversity in Local Language Maintenance and Restoration: A Reason for Optimism," 20.