Dying to be counted: the commodification of endangered languages in documentary linguistics[1]

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1. THE LEGITIMISING DISCOURSE OF LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

Over the past several years, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have settled into a vibrant scholarly critique of the 'discourse of language endangerment,' an ideologically charged discursive space that is kept bustling by a number of overlapping constituencies, including linguists, indigenous and minority rights activists, international organisations (including Christian missions), funding institutions, conservation groups, and the media in their search for 'human interest' stories (e.g., Silverstein 1998, Blommaert 2001, Hill 2002, Freeland and Patrick 2004, Duchêne and Heller 2007). The discourse draws on and perpetuates naïve Western assumptions about languages as bounded denotational codes, each with a formally stable reality and a naturalised inherence in an ethnic group, often one that is typically conceived of as culturally grounded in a unique 'ecological niche.' With the loss of each such language, the discourse warns, both the language's rightful heirs and the rest of us will be deprived of something profound and valuable. What that something is, and what makes it compelling, varies with the intended audience: where indigenous groups see autonomy rights or a spiritual connection to ancestral lands, biologists and conservationists may see species diversity, linguists the dream of a comprehensive grammatical theory, and public radio listeners a romanticised stability in what is perceived to be a time of unprecedented flux and degeneration (Cameron 1995). Despite certain problematic inconsistencies,[2] these systems of justification need not cause much dissonance;[3] after all, language ideologies are not about logic. As critics note, language loss is an issue that is regularly problematised in 'emotive and moralistic terms' (Cameron 2007: 269).

While analytically suspect in a number of respects, this 'emotive and moralistic' discourse has been – and continues to be – highly effective. Nowhere can these effects be seen more clearly than in linguistics itself, where over recent years the endangered languages agenda has brought about substantial shifts in the configuration of the discipline. Precisely because the cultural sensibilities animating this agenda are so widely shared – nationalist, essentialising, and appropriating though they may be – small, minority, and other peripheral

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[2] For example, must we support a clan's right to deforest their lands and spend the proceeds on a lifetime supply of tinned mackerel? This question follows a real discussion that took place in the first author's village field site.

[3] Though they sometimes do; see Hill (2002).

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languages are now recognised as valuable within linguistics in a way that extends beyond their bearing on linguistic theory (Austin and Simpson 2007). Emerging are new degree programs, training courses, publications, academic positions, and, above all, funding initiatives that emphasise fieldwork, corpus creation (i.e., recordings, transcription, annotation, and translation), grammar writing, archiving, and community language development (a list of the highlights is included as Appendix 1). These shifts have no doubt served to validate the discipline of linguistics to outsiders by making it more socially relevant after several decades of intense boundary-patrolling (Heller and Duchêne 2007: 3, Liberman 2007). But they also reflect the concerns of those within the discipline to perform work that they find meaningful, and to do so legitimately on their home professional turf. As we well know, the status of languages is tied to other forms of legitimacy. This is true where languages are framed as objects of study, just as it is where they are symbols of resistance or mechanisms of state control. So if we want, with the critics, to understand 'who is engaged, and how, in the discourses and actions to "save" these languages… and what is at stake for each group'; if we want to understand 'the consequences of these discourses for the distribution of material and symbolic resources' (Patrick 2007: 52), then the systems of power organising academic linguistics must necessarily form part of our account.

But the aim of this paper is not exactly critique. Our perspective is that of documentary linguists and language archivists who recognise a tension between the moral agenda that motivates endangered languages work on the one hand, and the way that agenda has been operationalised on the other. That is, even as a lofty moral discourse brings endangered languages into focus for the discipline, linguists' efforts to preserve these languages seem to lead inexorably to their reduction and commodification in ways that often *do* cause dissonance. In other words, even when we are 'clear about the relationship between our analysis and our stance', having determined it worthwhile to 'set aside complexity in the interests of strategic simplification' (Heller 2004: 286), we still find ourselves transforming our representations of the languages and communities we study into specific *kinds* of items that our stance does not necessarily sanction. This troubling transformation of languages – to indices, objects, and technical encodings – that documentary linguists now find taking place in their own hands, reflects not so much the kinds of specifically linguistic ideologies the critics have tended to point to as underlying the discourse of endangerment, but rather the forces of commodification, standardisation, and audit that shape the management of information more generally in contemporary Western culture.

2. LANGUAGES SINGULAR AND COMMON

In September 2007, through a spate of media announcements, many linguists became aware that a couple of their colleagues had just returned from a linguistic 'expedition' apparently intended to bring awareness to the problem of language endangerment and the possibilities of revitalisation – as well as to the Institute they had recently formed to further their own research. The sponsor was the

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National Geographic Society. What is most interesting about this media campaign for present purposes is the overwhelmingly negative response it elicited from fellow linguists. Through the informal channels of email lists and blogs, linguists in documentary circles registered their discomfort with the image of 'linguist as hero in pith helmet',[4] with the loose handling of the linguistic details, and with the subordination of professional and social responsibility to the interests of a private venture, despite the enthusiastic public attention their activities succeeded in drawing to the more general cause.[5]

At the heart of these reactions was a view of languages as singular in value, as opposed to common, comparable, and exchangeable.[6] Taking their inspiration from similarly singularising human rights texts, the Linguistic Society of America's statements on 'the need for the documentation of linguistic diversity' and 'language rights' (LSA 1994, 1996) confirm this view insomuch as they proclaim each language to be an 'intellectual achievement' which speakers have a right to enjoy and maintain and which linguists have an obligation to protect. As members of the specialised exchange sphere in which each language's singularity is upheld by a 'common cultural code and a specifically focused morality,' documentary linguists could not comfortably endorse the hero-in-pith-helmet scenario. It was too transparently a marketing stunt presupposing the saleability of languages, 'the unmistakable indicator of commodity status' (Kopytoff 1986: 78, 69).

3. THE REDUCTION OF LANGUAGE TO COMMON EXCHANGE VALUES IN DOCUMENTARY LINGUISTICS

While instructive, such egregious examples of commercialism are rare.[7] More subtle and pervasive kinds of commoditisation – that is, reduction of languages to common exchange values – abound, particularly in competitive and programmatic contexts such as grant-seeking and standard-setting where languages are necessarily compared and ranked. Documentary linguists now find themselves having to play a 'numbers game' in which the languages they study are prioritised by the weakness of their speaker base and their 'degree of endangerment' using official metrics and scales, like the deceptively precise speaker and 'ethnic group' numbers published in *Ethnologue*, or the nine-parameter 'endangerment index'

[4] We are indebted to Michael Erard for this 'pithy' formulation!
[5] As one commentator put it, 'some of us … don't think you can "document" a language with a helicopter, a trailing news team and a day looking at rock art' (http://anggarrgoon.wordpress.com/2007/09/19/wangga-wanker).
[6] Hence the talk of endangered languages as 'priceless treasures.'
[7] The language-learning software company Rosetta Stone now has an entire department devoted to endangered languages, but some of the tension here is softened by the fact that it is a response to employee demand and heavily subsidised by the company, rather than exploitation of a newly profitable market niche. See http://www.rosettastone.com/en/endangered-languages.

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popularised by UNESCO (UNESCO 2003).[8] They are providing answers to questions that would be inconceivable to even ask about major languages; for example, the LSA's Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation was recently presented with a proposal for assessing 'adequacy of documentation' which offered explicit accounting standards for such features as lexicon size and the kinds and quantity of texts in an 'adequate' collection. Interestingly in light of the tensions just described, it was not impassively received.

Documentary research is now frequently framed around the archival materials to result, a development Nathan (2004) has called 'archivism': quantifiable properties such as recording hours, data volume, and file parameters, and technical desiderata like 'archival quality' and 'portability' have become commonplace reference points in assessing the aims and outcomes of language documentation (Bird and Simons 2003, E-MELD School of Best Practice http://linguistlist.org/emeld/school/lingstart.html). For example, the results of proposed fieldwork in around one-third of ELDP applications are described according to a 'recipe' of audio resolution and sampling rate (typically 16 bit 44MHz), video file format (typically MPEG-2), transcription file format (typically .trs or .eaf) and annotation (typically using Toolbox/Shoebox). Uncoincidentally, this emphasis on the formal properties of language archives lends itself readily to the commodifying idiom of 'resources' (i.e., a 'richly structured, large and diverse' array of 'texts, recordings, dictionaries, annotations, software, protocols, data models, file formats, newsgroups and web indexes') that 'consumers' such as 'linguists, engineers, teachers, and actual speakers' discover and access through the assistance of 'service providers' (OLAC http://www.language-archives.org). Of course, documentation invariably involves technology (whether we are making digital recordings or writing down what we hear on paper!), and the quality of its application will naturally shape the utility of the outcome. Moreover, the logic of endangerment means that such documentation is likely to be unrepeatable and so should be carried out with sophistication and care. However, technical parameters such as these are now foregrounded to the point that they are eclipsing discussions of documentation methods that would be better aligned with the field's actual needs. Video recordings are made without reference to hypotheses, goals, or methodology, simply because the technology is available, portable and relatively inexpensive. Documentary linguists may have a basic knowledge of audio file parameters and will dutifully deprecate the notion of archiving compressed audio, while having little or no knowledge about microphone types and properties, even though microphone choice and handling is the single greatest determiner of recording quality.

Commoditising forces have also affected the way documentary linguists frame their relationships with the communities in which they work. Linguists' professional obligations to their field communities are now often formulated in terms of transacted objects rather than through knowledge sharing, joint engagement in language maintenance activities, or other kinds of interactionally-

[8] With the development of Geographical Information Systems, language mapping projects that give numerical coordinates to spatially locate speakers are also on the rise. See, for example, http://linguistlist.org/llmap.

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defined achievements. Over the past five years of ELDP funding cycles, for example, applicants have settled on a conventionalised approach to satisfying the program requirement that project results be 'accessible to and usable by members of the language community'; it involves the transaction of language primers, CDs, and subtitled videos that are returned to communities in recompense for the time and effort they expended on the research. 'Community awareness and acceptance' of a proposed language documentation project is held by some granting bodies, like DoBeS and ELDP, to be distillable into the form of a letter of support from 'an appropriate representative of the language community' and is required before a proposal – even to conduct a pilot project! – can be considered. Not only does this requirement have the potential to derail useful work and deform the social reality it purports to document (it can be less than obvious how to define 'the community' or determine who in the community is empowered to write such a letter), but the trade in written documents can have political consequences as projects evolve. The 'extremely demanding and elaborate process' through which a community's goodwill was transformed into such a document led one linguist 'to reflect on how much we first world academics demand of indigenous communities to conform to our needs' (Grinevald 2006: 363).

4. KNOWING 'OUR NEEDS'

There is thus a substantial disconnect between the avowed values of the field and the systems that organise the practice of documentary research. A 'common objectifying thrust' can no doubt be found in language study from early colonial situations onward (Errington 2001: 34). But the commoditisation prevalent in contemporary documentary linguistics derives from two forces particular to our time. One of these is digitisation, which demands that language data be formalised and standardised if it is to realise its promise of making the information easily searchable and widely distributable (Shiva 1993; Golumbia 2004, forthcoming).[9] The other is the Euro-American culture of audit, accounting, and oversight in which quantification, evaluation, and competitive ranking are pervasive (Strathern 2000).

To understand why these forces hold such sway over documentary linguistics, we must return to the discourse of endangerment with which our discussion began. While emotionally and morally compelling, this discourse has given linguists a motive for responding to the issue of language endangerment while providing little guidance on the form that response should take. The

[9] This powerful ideological force underpinning standardisation is expressed in support of another morally charged technological project – fulfilling the dream of making computers 'intelligent agents' through the 'Semantic Web':

> The World Wide Web as it is currently constituted … is unmanageable … In order to map this terrain [of resources] more precisely, computational agents require machine-readable descriptions of the content and capabilities of Web accessible resources (OWL Web Ontology Language Guide, http://www.w3.org/TR/owl-guide).

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substantial literature on the topic that has accumulated over the past 15 years can be read as a collective attempt to chart a path from a problem (languages are dying at an unprecedented rate) to a consensus on the appropriate professional course of action. Indeed, it consists in large part of case studies offered in the hope that generalisations might eventually be made across them. But systematising conceptual efforts such as Himmelmann 2002 notwithstanding, such generalisations have been slow in coming. A set of agreed upon principles of language documentation with associated methods simply does not exist, and the resulting questions that this leaves open are fundamental: Are the discipline's goals social or formal? Are its data symbolic or real-time and binary? Is the role of the 'archive' for dissemination or storage only? On what basis could we decide?

At the same time, with the many new academic programs, funding initiatives, and other institutions that have been developed and that reinforce the endangerment discourse's moral message, documentary research has far higher stakes than ever before, not only for the survival of languages, but also for the success of the linguists who study them. We see evidence here of the 'collectibles' paradox described by Kopytoff (1986: 81): as languages become 'more singular and worthy of being collected', they 'acquire a price and become a commodity and their singularity is to that extent undermined'. In this context, documentary linguists find themselves having to represent languages in ways that must be measured and compared, but where the terms for establishing difference or superiority are unclear.[10] Lacking a guiding framework for assessing quality, progress, and value in their work, documentary linguists fall back on established patterns, referring to quantifiable indices of language vitality or technical standards for the density of acoustic information even when these are not rationalised by the particular language or research situation.

Resolving the tensions we have been describing will require an approach to documentation that is more closely tied to the moral vision that continues to attract linguists to the language endangerment problem. However, this goal is not well served by a totalising theory that distinguishes documentary work from the rest of linguistics as a distinct and separate entity, as in the Himmelmann approach. Linguistics already has theoretically-informed ways of comparing languages for a host of reasons that are orthogonal to their moral value, and it is by distancing themselves from these that documentary linguists have been led to ask confused and unproductive questions such as 'how do we know when to stop documenting?' or 'how many recording hours should I put in the archive?'

What is needed instead is an explicit recognition that the singularity of languages is irreducible; if languages are singular then the methods used to study them must be singular as well. Each research situation is unique, and documentary work derives its quality from its appropriateness to the particularities of that situation. So rather than approaching endangered languages with preformulated standards deriving from their own culture, documentary linguists must strive to be

[10] Block (2001: 63), drawing on Max Weber, sees this as a problem characteristic of art in contrast to science.

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singularly responsive – both to what is distinctive about each language scientifically, and to the particular needs of the speaker communities with whom their work brings them into contact (Dobrin forthcoming). By cultivating a subsidiary discourse of responsiveness that better corresponds to the humanistic conception of all languages as inherently valuable, documentary linguists can begin to avert those unconstructive forms of commodification that are driven by bureaucratic impulses and rising digital paradigms, and bring their work into closer alignment with the moral stance of the field.

Appendix 1

A partial list of recent academic responses to the problem of language endangerment

Degree programs:

MA in Language Documentation and Description and PhD in Field Linguistics, School of Oriental and African Studies Endangered Languages Academic Programme (since 2003)

MA in Language Documentation and Conservation, University of Hawaii (since 2007)

European Masters co-ordinated by Lyon-2, Leiden and School of Oriental and African Studies (to commence 2009)

Training courses:

Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen program grantee training courses, (annually since 2002)

Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen summer school, Frankfurt University (2005)

Endangered Languages Documentation Programme grantee training courses (annually since 2005)

Archiving workshops organised by Open Language Archives Community (annually at Linguistic Society of America meetings since 2004)

Courses at Stanford Linguistic Society of America Institute (2007)

InField summer school, University of California Santa Barbara (2008)

3-L summer school, Lyon-2 University (2008)

Ghana summer school of linguistics (2008)

Publications:

Language Documentation and Description, published annually by the School of Oriental and African Studies, 5 volumes to date (Spanish translation in process)

Language Documentation and Conservation, published by University of Hawaii Press, 2 volumes to date

Essentials of Language Documentation, published by Mouton de Gruyter 2006

Las Bases (Spanish translation of *Essentials of Language Documentation*), published by INALI, Mexico 2007

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Handbook of Endangered Languages, commissioned by Cambridge University Press

Readings in Endangered Languages (4 volumes), commissioned by Routledge

Special issue of *Linguistische Berichte* on endangered languages, published 2007

Academic positions:

6 posts specifically for endangered languages documentation, School of Oriental and African Studies Endangered Languages Academic Programme

3 posts specifically for endangered languages archiving, School of Oriental and African Studies Endangered Language Archive

3 posts for EL specialists, including new professor, University of Manchester Department of Linguistics

New post in EL documentation, University of Hawaii Department of Linguistics

New posts for EL specialists, University of Regensburg programme in Endangered Languages

Archives:

Aboriginal Studies Electronic Data Archive, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (since 1994)

Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America, University of Texas (since 2000)

Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen Archive, Max Planck Institute Nijmegen (since 2000)

Rosetta Project, Long Now Foundation (since 2000)

Langes et Civilisation et Traditions Orale, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (since 2001)

Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources, University of Melbourne/University of Sydney (2003)

Endangered Languages Archive, School of Oriental and African Studies (since 2005)

Leipzig Endangered Languages Archive, Max Planck Institute Leipzig (since 2005)

Funding initiatives:

Volkswagen Foundation Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen project (since 2000)

Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, School of Oriental and African Studies (since 2002)

National Science Foundation-National Endowment for the Humanities Documenting Endangered Languages initiative (since 2004)

Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research Endangered Languages Project (2005-2007)

Smaller initiatives: Foundation for Endangered Languages (USA), Endangered Languages Fund (England), Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen (Germany)

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