Response to Wall Street Journal Editorial

On March 8, 2002, an editorial appeared in the Wall Street Journal (page W13) under the headline, “The world’s languages are dying; the United Nations is upset about this.” The author, John L. Miller, is listed as a reporter for The Nation. There is no free access to the Journal on-line, but you can find a discussion link on the Endangered Language List, archived at:

http://listserv.linguistlist.org/archives/endangered-languages-1.html

Below is a response, submitted to the Journal but not published by them, written by ELF President, Douglas H. Whalen

John L. Miller (Wall Street Journal, March 8, 2002, p. W13) would like to convince us that it’s a good thing that half the languages on the planet will disappear within a generation. Protecting language diversity, in his opinion, is as “dubious” as, say, affirmative action in college admissions or preserving endangered species. Miller implicitly admits that language endangerment is a fundamental question, but the issues are poorly served in his piece.

He first confuses language change with language death. Yes, it is true that all languages change and that over the course of a thousand years or so, it is difficult if not impossible to understand the original. But life is change. Does Miller feel less alive because he is no longer the baby he once was? Or, to adopt a closer analogy, does he feel that Western civilization has died because our way of life is almost unrecognizable compared to the Middle Ages? Presumably not; it is clear that only dead things remain unchanged. So the fact that languages change is irrelevant to the question of whether they should die or not.

Miller’s assumption that modern culture is good for everyone is comforting to those of us who live in that culture, but it is far from true for the “primitive” people he would like to save. Most indigenous peoples lose a large percentage of their population upon contact with the modern world through disease. Then, they are immediately “poor,” having had no reason to generate the wealth that matters in the modern economy. Would they rather starve while looking at a picture of a Big Mac, or continue living on the “fistful of beetle larvae” that sustained their ancestors for generations? This is without considering whether one diet or the other is actually healthier. At the same time, Miller conveniently ignores the fact that indigenous people today are mostly in marginal ecosystems, precisely because the good ones have already been acquired by the modern economy (through one means or another).

Miller seems as unconcerned about the disappearance of ecosystems as he is of the disappearance of languages. Perhaps it will only be when he takes his last puff of oxygen from the last tank on earth that he might be convinced that diversity is a good thing. We have reached the stage, as a thinking species, at which we can recognize long-term trends, but these trends unfold at a time scale that is difficult for us to react to. What will the consequences of language and species loss be? We won’t know for sure for decades or centuries, but we know that there is no going back once we lose them.

It was a great surprise to see Miller cite the public education system as a reason for not allowing bilingualism, since he probably would say that that same system fails monolingual speakers as well. He thinks that bilingual education leaves its students “fluent in neither” language, but would he feel the same looking at just the English speakers’ efforts? Bilingualism is the norm in most of the world, and most people acquire the level of competence in each language that they need. Further, the only reason that non-native speakers of English would need the kind of competence that Miller envisions would be if they were planning on abandoning their native culture, i.e., “rudimentary” may be plenty. However, it is clear that Miller hopes that they will abandon their culture and globalize—after all, it works for him. Why can’t everyone else be like him?

Americans like to think that they have learned nothing from indigenous peoples, but let’s look at one of the traditional “American” treasures, democracy. The roots of democracy are traced to the Golden Age of Greece (which we only know about through the preservation efforts of Muslim clerics, but that’s another story). Why was it, then,

Continued on page 2
Our Board of Directors:

Douglas H. Whalen, President/Founder
Linguist, Haskins Laboratories, New Haven, CT

Stephen R. Anderson
Linguist, Yale University, New Haven, CT

Rebecca Bending
Yakama/Nez Perce, Toppenish, WA

C. J. Cherryh
Author and Classicist, Spokane, WA

Noam Chomsky
Linguist, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA

Durbin Feeling
Linguist, Oklahoma University, Norman, OK

Gay Story Hamilton
Mohegan Council of Elders, Uncasville, CT

Dennis Holt, Secretary/Treasurer
Linguist, Central CT State U., New Britain, CT

Peter Ladefoged
Linguist, University of California, Los Angeles, CA

Johanna Nichols
Linguist, University of California, Berkeley, CA

Karl V. Teeter
Linguist, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

ELFN:

Matthew Richardson, Editor
Graduate Student, Linguistics Dept.
Yale University

ELFN: Volume 6, No. 1, April 2002
Printed in New Haven, CT
©2002, Endangered Language Fund, Inc.

The Endangered Language Fund
Department of Linguistics
Yale University
P.O. Box 208236
New Haven, CT 06520-8236 USA

e-mail: elf@haskins.yale.edu
www: http://www.ling.yale.edu/~elf

---

Editorial - Continued from page 1

that democracy was not the norm in Europe, where the keepers of this tradition supposedly lived? Why was it that they needed to come to America to (re)discover democracy? It was not until they came here and saw democracy in action in the Native communities that it began to dawn on them that there was a better way to rule people. The rest, as they say, is history. But without that diversity, we would not have a USA now; we would still be vassals and serfs serving royal masters. We have yet to discover the other treasures that indigenous peoples encode in their languages, and if we do not preserve those languages now, we will never know.

VW Stiftung Announces Grants

The Volkswagen Stiftung of Germany has announced its most recent awards in its endangered language documentation initiative. This is the first set of awards in the main phase; the preliminary phase began two years ago. ELF’s David Harrison was successful with his renewal (though now be going through the MPI in Leipzig courtesy of Bernard Comrie). Barry Carlson, who won an ELF grant in 2000, was also given a VW grant. This major investment by one of the world’s leading nonprofits is a welcome addition to the efforts to preserve endangered languages.

The next round of grants will be considered in the fall. More details can be found at http://www.volkswagen-stiftung.de. Please consider submitting a proposal, or encouraging your colleagues to do so. You can contact us at ELF as well for more information (elf@haskins.yale.edu).

2002 awards:


K. David Harrison, Yale U., “Altai-Sayan Language and Ethnography Project (Tofa),” €588,300 over 3 years.


Arienne Dwyer, University of Kansas, “The documentation of Salar and Monguor,” €350,000 over 3 years.


Stephen C. Levinson, MPI Nijmegen, “Documentation of Trumai,” €286,500 over 3 years.


Sabine Dedenbach-Salazar, U. Bonn, “A multimedia documentation of Uru-Chipaya languages and cultures in their territorial setting (Bolivia, Peru),” €50,000.

Barry F. Carlson, University of Victoria, “Lacandon Cultural Heritage,” €345,000 over 3 years.
Conference Report: Revitalizing Algonquian Languages:
Sharing Effective Language Renewal Practices
Feb. 21-23, 2002. Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, Mashantucket, CT.

By Douglas H. Whalen (ELF) and Beth Lee (Big Head Interactive)

The awakening of Native American languages in the northeastern part of the U.S. is reaching more and more tribes. To recognize this trend and to help create a regional coordination of efforts, Charlene Jones of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe of Connecticut held a conference in February. Two days of talks brought together about 150 Native activists, linguists and other interested people to the grounds of the highly successful Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center. The Endangered Language Fund was represented by us, and we present this report of the proceedings.

The first day was opened by the Pequot Spiritual Advisor and Tribal Elders Council member Laughing Woman. Then, Blair Rudes of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte presented a discussion of how early language sources can be used. The eastern Algonquian languages are in a somewhat better position that others in that there is a fair amount of written material in and about them. Dr. Rudes showed how linguistic reconstruction can help expand on this material, taking the audience through the development of eastern Algonquian vowels from proto-Algonquian.

The session then split into two groups, one which heard Jon Reyhner of Northern Arizona U. discuss the revitalization of severely endangered languages, and another which was treated to a workshop on language recording led by Laura Grant of Big Head Interactive. Dr. Reyhner’s discussion touched on many of the challenges and frustrations that face language revitalization efforts; these are even more challenging for language revival efforts, yet the techniques for overcoming them are often similar. The use of a dedicated language committee—not just a single individual—is crucial here. Dr. Grant’s workshop was more specific, demonstrating techniques for recording language sessions with multiple talkers, including a discussion of specific equipment, platforms and programs. Big Head Interactive is producing the interactive cd-roms for the Mohogan language project.

The next presentation was meant to be given by Jessie Little Doe Fermno, who has almost singlehandedly brought the Wampanoag language back to life. She was unable to attend, however, and her slot was filled by Gerald L. Hill, President of the Indigenous Language Institute. He discussed general issues relating to language efforts. Despite the good work that linguists do, he insisted the tribes not depend on them too much. The language belongs to the tribe, and they need to make their own decisions. When a linguist is there to provide advice, and the tribe is ready to act on it, that is the best situation. Even better, of course, is when several tribal members receive enough linguistic training to be able to do both functions. He reiterated the phrasing of Leanne Hinton: Languages that are no longer spoken are not dead, just sleeping. We need to talk about acquiring a language, not learning it—learning is for an academic subject, acquisition is for making use of a language. And for those languages that still have native speakers, we can’t just rely on the grandparents to do all of the talking. If the language is going to awaken, the parents have to start using it too.

Keynote speaker Kathleen Bragdon, of William and Mary College, discussed the past, present and future of New England languages. The written record of these languages is comparatively rich, and includes a fair amount of material written by native speakers for other native speakers. Massachusetts was used not just for translating the Bible and other works but as the sole language for letters, wills and commentary. All known examples of this writing have been published by Dr. Bragdon and Ives Goddard (1988). The last known example is a gravestone from 1787. Interestingly, one of the pressures to switch to English among communities on Martha’s Vineyard came from speakers of English who wanted to understand the Massachussetts preachers, who were felt to be more inspiring than the English-speaking preachers on the island.

Three language projects in Oklahoma were reported on by Bruce Pearson, emeritus from the University of South Carolina; his collaborator, James Rementer, was not able to attend. The three languages represent three different stages of language decline (or, perhaps, “recline,” if we want to stay with the “sleeping” metaphor). Shawnee has about 200 living speakers, but all are in their 50’s or older. Delaware has one fluent speaker left, along with some who have competence in the language. Wyandot’s last speaker died fifty years ago. All three languages are undergoing revivals. Dr. Pearson had several recommendations, most of which were the same regardless of whether there were living speakers available. Certainly, if speakers are available, then every effort should be made to have material recorded. But any effort needs to just get started. It helps to have a linguist, but we need to remember that, basically, everybody is a linguist—we all had to learn at least one language already. (Still, some people bring these patterns to consciousness more easily than others. They’re the ones that get called linguists.) Interactive classes are essential, with lots of repetition, games and audio tapes. You have to expect opposition and nay-sayers, but you can’t let them discourage you. You also have to expect drop-outs from any program. But the main message is that language revival can be done.

An exciting example of this was presented in the last presentation of the day by Daryl Baldwin of the Myaamia Project, Miami (Ohio) University. Miami also lost its last
speaker some years back, but Baldwin learned enough from the copious written records that he began bringing his children up bilingual in Miami and English. His wife spoke English with them, but Baldwin would only speak with them in Miami. The results were amazingly successful, with the children showing the pattern that is often found with children in a Creole environment, namely, that their competence exceeds that of their parents. Baldwin now has some institutional support to expand his program.

On the second day of the conference, Beth (Macdonald) Lee (BigHeadInteractive) continued the discussion of how technology can fit into a language-saving strategy. Lori Quigley, Mary Todd and Yolanda Smith (Seneca Nation) presented a status report on the revitalization of Seneca. It covered the goals of the extremely well-funded Seneca program, and demonstrated many of the learning aids developed to date. They hope to engage children in Seneca language learning opportunities by furnishing many objects and curriculum aids in both the school environment, and through take home gifts, such as bilingual story books, etc. Wayne Newell (Passamaquoddy) started off with a humorous story in Passamaquoddy. This was received with waves of giggles from folks that understood Passamaquoddy. Wayne went on to give a brief history of the efforts in his community, and enjoin the audience to begin or sustain whatever efforts are afoot in their own communities.

Jim “Swifteagle” Crews reported on restoring Shinnecock to eastern Long Island, while Laura Grant (Bigheadinteractive) continued the discussion of the use of technology. Tall Oak (Everett Weeden, Mashantucket Pequot/Wampanoag) spoke on the importance of spirituality in the New England Algonquian languages. Trudie Lamb Richmond (Schaghticoke) and Melissa Fawcett Tantaquidgeon (Mohegan) addressed issues facing tribes without a fluent native speaker. Arthur Jacobs (Star Walkers Inc.) presented a set of educational games on the computer that can help with language learning.

Nis Nahta, Bruce Boszum, and Elder (and ELF board member) Gay Story Hamilton (Mohegan Tribe) spoke about the current efforts in the Mohegan community to revitalize their language. The importance of language to culture and community thought process was stressed. Having to think about issues in English, rather than having the words and thought patterns of Mohegan, is a problem. They encouraged sharing and cooperation among communities engaged in language and cultural revitalization efforts.

This was an extremely useful conference, with a lot of material packed into two short days. It is hoped that these collaborative efforts will continue. All the participants expressed their gratitude to the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe for hosting the conference.