



## Book Review Issue

The issue of language endangerment has garnered a fair amount of attention lately in terms of publications. They range from survey works aimed at general audiences, like David Crystals' *Language Death* to compilations of accounts and techniques, as in Leanne Hinton and the late Ken Hale's *Green Book of Language Revitalization*. Two major works

are reviewed here. Look inside as well for a list of book reviews that appeared on the Linguist List, the on-line forum for linguistics. There is a wealth of information that is easily available these days. We invite you to sample it; the urgency of our mission becomes more apparent with every page.

--The Editor

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### *RLS REVISITED*

A review of *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved? Reversing Language Shift, Revisited: A 21st Century Perspective*, edited by Joshua A. Fishman. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2001. xvi, 503 pp.

By Dennis Holt, Central Connecticut State University and Secretary/Treasurer, Endangered Language Fund.

Sociolinguist Joshua Fishman was one of the first linguists to alert the world to the dangers of language-shift and language-loss and to suggest that language-maintenance might constitute a worthwhile field of scholarly and scientific inquiry. For almost four decades he has documented, supported, and guided efforts to revitalize endangered languages, and his contributions have helped to develop and energize what has now become a worldwide program to stem the tide of language-loss.

A follow-up to his *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (1991), Fishman's new book seems to promise answers to the question of its title. However, such expectations turn out to be only partly fulfilled.

In his earlier book, Fishman notes that while the progression from language-attrition to language-death has often been commented on, the opposing tendency, that of reversing language-shift (RLS), has only rarely been the topic of scholarly studies. With the present book, Fishman attempts to further correct this imbalance, and to do so he marshals 18 reports by various scholars and activists on as many different RLS situations throughout the world.

In his introductory chapter, Fishman labels the globalization of pan-Western pop culture as the principal enemy of minority languages and their associated cultures. Since lan-

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### *VOICES ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION*

A review of *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*, by Joshua Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine. Oxford University Press, 2000. 241pp.

By Robert Orr, University of Ottawa.

Note: This is an extract of this review. For the full version, see the upcoming issue of *General Linguistics* at <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/lrc/gl/gl.html>

This book (VV) is a substantial, ground-breaking contribution to the growing literature on the ongoing phenomenon of language death and the related wider issues of biodiversity. Nettle and Romaine (N&R) have both already published important work in the area, and related areas, and VV complements and extends this work. There are several unifying themes running through the book, all linked to the idea that linguistic diversity is an important component of biodiversity, and that the looming large-scale losses thereof are very serious (see especially 41-49). Recently this topic has been assuming increasing importance in scholarly discourse, and has reached a wider audience than most linguistic discussions.

VV is divided into eight chapters, each with pithy, catchy titles: "Where Have All the Languages Gone"; "A World of Diversity"; "Lost Words/Lost Worlds"; "The Ecology of Language"; "The Biological Wave"; "The Economic Wave"; "Why Something Should Be Done"; and "Sustainable Futures". The chapters are in turn divided into sections with similarly well-chosen titles. Their mere citation gives an idea of the contents of the book: N&R's writing style is mostly very clear. There are no footnotes as such, but this gap is partially covered by a ten-page section titled "References and Further Reading", which provides extensive

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Yale University



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*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](mailto:elf@haskins.yale.edu)

www: <http://www.ling.yale.edu/~elf>

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**Correction:** We misspelled **Zarifa Nazarova**'s name in the last newsletter, announcing her grant award. We apologize for the misake.

## Other Reviews Online

Here are some links to other reviews of books on endangered languages that can be found on the Linguist List.

Newman, Paul, and Martha Ratliff, ed. (2001) *Linguistic Fieldwork*. Cambridge University Press. Reviewed by ELF grant recipient Gary Holton, Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

<http://linguistlist.org/issues/12/12-2660.html#1>

Maffi, Luisa, ed. (2001) *On Biocultural Diversity: Linking Language, Knowledge, and the Environment*. Smithsonian Institution Press. Reviewed by Veronica Fernandez and Laura Alonso, University of Barcelona.

<http://linguistlist.org/issues/12/12-2585.html#1>

King, Kendall A. (2000) *Language revitalization processes and prospects: Quicha in the Ecuadorian Andes, Multilingual Matters*. Reviewed by Joan Smith/Kocamahhul, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

<http://linguistlist.org/issues/12/12-1706.html#1>

Two other reviews of the Fishman book, by Ken Decker, SIL International, and Angela Bartens, University of Helsinki, can be found at:

<http://linguistlist.org/issues/12/12-927.html#1>

<http://linguistlist.org/issues/12/12-1126.html#1>

Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove. (2000) *Linguistic Genocide in Education Or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Reviewed by Kathleen Tacosky, William Jewell College

<http://linguistlist.org/issues/11/11-1415.html#1>

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guage-shift is known to progress by way of the minority language's yielding of functionality to the dominant language in domain after domain, Fishman concludes that what is needed, as a selective, partial resistance to globalization, is for threatened languages to effect a kind of compromise with dominant languages in terms of which societal functions each will assume. Only in this way, he claims, through a kind of institutionalized diglossia, will minority languages stand a chance of survival.

In addition to providing information on the current status of threatened languages and on efforts to revitalize them, a number of the writers here have attempted to assess the validity of the eight-stage "Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale" (GIDS) which Fishman proposed in his earlier book as a model of language-shift and also as a sort of template for conceptualizing, designing, and prioritizing interventions intended to ameliorate such situations. While the GIDS seems useful for understanding many cases of RLS, it does not always perfectly match the circumstances. For example, as reported by Nancy Hornberger and Kendall King, evidence from RLS efforts on behalf of Quechua "suggests that the role of the younger and often highly politicized generation may be insufficiently stressed in [Fishman's GIDS] framework." [p. 175].

Other results reported here also run counter to expectations. For example, in their chapter on Navajo, a language of great concern to Americanists, Tiffany Lee and Daniel McLaughlin provide in effect merely an updated status-report, with virtually no information on progress in RLS. Similarly, Nena and Richard Benton report only meager results for Maori, despite heroic efforts by many individuals during the last few years of the 20th century, some of

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which have served as models for projects involving other endangered languages.

Still, not all the results presented here are disappointing or discouraging. Pádraig Ó Riagáin, reporting on Irish, tells of substantial increases in the numbers of both speakers and programs to teach the language. And, in his chapter on Catalán, Miquel Strubell reports a spectacular increase in the number of speakers during the decade 1986-1996, especially among the younger generation.

E. Annamalai and V. Gnanasundaram report on the peculiar case of Andamanese, the indigenous language of the Andaman Islands, all of whose 35 remaining speakers dwell in a single homogeneous community on a small island, separated from the main sectors of contemporary Andamanese society. Somewhat amazingly, the few newborns of this tiny community continue to learn Andamanese as their native tongue.

Efurosibina Adegbija's chapter on Oko, while ostensibly concerning only a single minority language of Nigeria, actually provides a much broader picture of language-endangerment in Africa, where many languages, like Oko, are threatened not so much by European colonial languages but by official and semi-official indigenous languages of much greater population and prestige.

One important realization that emerges from these reports is that there are many different kinds of RLS situation. There are indigenous regional languages such as Oko and Frisian that are in competition with other indigenous languages. There are substratum languages in conquered territories, such as Basque, Otomí, and Quechua, which have continued to hold their own during centuries of political and linguistic domination. There are the languages of immigrant groups, such as Yiddish and Puerto Rican Spanish in New York City and the languages of European immigrants to Australia, whose speakers, if they wish to maintain their native languages, must resist the pressures to assimilate to the mainstream languages of their new homes. And there are the uniquely individual situations of Ainu, indigenous Australian languages, Quebecois French, and (somewhat surprisingly) Hebrew, all of them also dealt with here.

What, then, is to be done? Virtually all of these cases of RLS involve situations of increasing bilingualism in which what seems to be called for is the reacquisition of the threatened language by young adults, not the suppression of the dominant language – which would no doubt be an unsuccessful undertaking in any event. A related point, continually made in these pages, is that in order to survive, languages must have or must reattain the home-family-neighborhood-community functions which are of crucial importance in ensuring intergenerational mother-tongue transmission (the essential Stage 6 of the GIDS). A number of the writers here also emphasize the extreme importance of attitudes toward the threatened language, especially those of its own speech-community. It is clear that without the positive RLS efforts of its own speakers, especially those of child-bearing age, no minority language stands a chance in the face of the various social and economic pressures that would hasten its demise.

In the book's final paragraph, Fishman again asks the question of his title and answers it in part as follows: "Yes, more of them can be saved than has been the case in the past, but only by following careful strategies that focus on priorities ... and only if the true complexity of local human identity, linguistic competence and global interdependence [is] fully recognized." This complexity is duly recognized and represented by the studies in this thought-provoking book. Needless to say, all of us who are involved with issues of language-endangerment owe Professor Fishman a debt of gratitude for his ideas, his encouragement, and his leadership through the years, and especially for his never-flagging hope.

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commentaries on the citations, and detailed sourcing. With regard to biodiversity, one omission is the lack of any substantial reference to the work of the Terralingua organization (<http://www.terralingua.org/learn.html>). Terralingua has emphasized links between biodiversity and linguistic diversity for some time (e.g., Harmon 1996, Maffi 1996, Maffi et al. 1999, Posey 1999, Maffi 2001).

N&R are well aware (24-25) that VV aims to cover a huge topic, and on reading the book one feels that generally they have done so very successfully. They go beyond mere description of the issues, and suggest proactive measures that could be taken to stem the loss of linguistic diversity and individual languages.

One issue that constantly surfaces in such discourse is the pressure exerted by spreading, "metropolitan" languages such as English, and the concomitant access to a wider, superficially more glamorous culture that is gained by switching to such languages. Again, N&R's treatment of this issue (173, 190, *passim*) provides a great deal of food for thought: there does not have to be a conflict between bi- or multilingualism and economic imperatives, although see also below. It is a brutal fact that members of small, isolated communities are often all too eager to shed their original cultures and attempt to join in the larger ones, which usually includes the loss of their languages. This tension between the center and peripheries has been noted for some time; N&R cite the example of Cornish (127-128); Maclean (1972: 65) cites disparaging Victorian comments on the eagerness of the St. Kildans to take up the latest fashions from London once they became aware of them.

Another point that N&R also demonstrate quite convincingly, by citing a few well-chosen examples, is the great value of the traditional knowledge stored in many communities speaking endangered languages, and expressed through the medium of these languages. They discuss some examples in great detail, showing clearly why this material matters (69-77). Later on (166-170) they provide further examples of how indigenous knowledge can make a real contribution to vast areas of human endeavor.

Throughout the book N&R provide an exemplary discussion of diversity, centered especially on pages 26-49. They extend their framework to include earlier work on linguistic diversity by scholars such as Nichols (1992). In this section, especially N&R strike a balance. Although they demonstrate that Europe is less linguistically diverse than other continents, their treatment is not one-dimensionally anti-European, unlike many such discussions nowadays. They also show (33-34) that the loss of the languages of Western Europe would not amount to any great loss of linguistic diversity, whereas the loss of a comparable number of languages from New Guinea or South America would amount to far more. N&R suggest that at some stage in the remote past the linguistic situation all over the world might have resembled that currently found in New Guinea. N&R cite (51-61) several examples of language loss, which make for sobering reading.

Possibly the most important recently published general work to discuss the broader issues raised by N&R is Diamond (1997), which has proved a ground-breaking reference for this sort of study. N&R cite Diamond extensively, dealing with many of the same issues (the advantages possessed by Eurasia (100-101, *passim*), the fact that most of the history of human language would have taken place before the emergence of agriculture (104), etc). They provide a useful summary of his relevant arguments. Disappointingly, however, in many ways N&R's treatment is a step back from Diamond's: they continue to cite "European expansions" (124, 125), apparently ignoring Diamond's (1997:335) caveat: "When we think

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*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

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of major overseas population movements, we tend to focus on those since Columbus's discovery of the Americas, and on the resulting replacements of non-Europeans by Europeans within historic times. But there were also big overseas movements long before Columbus, and prehistoric replacements of non-European peoples by other non-European peoples."

Some scholars believe that about all that can realistically be done for dead languages is to write grammars and dictionaries, as comprehensive as possible. The fact that these are daunting tasks for many almost unrecorded languages explains the sense of urgency recently expressed in works such as Dixon (1997), and Dixon and Aikhenvald (1999: 1-2, 7, 19, 65, 72, 107, 270, 293-294, 312). This approach carries its own dangers. Steel (1975: 121-122) describes vividly the psychological dislocation which the very presence of outsiders involved in such work may bring. Mainly basing himself on data from Pacific languages, Mühlhäusler (1998: 169, 212, ff.) points out that the very act of writing grammars and compiling dictionaries of languages which had previously only existed as spoken media distorts the nature of the languages themselves. He goes on to express pessimism about the continued existence of such languages. N&R's approach to the problem expands the objective to include (179) "the maintenance of the groups who speak [the respective endangered language]", equating maintaining the languages with maintaining the actual speakers and their communities. They cite three case studies illustrating how this may be done.

This is a book that will certainly generate a great deal of discussion, and, it is fervently to be hoped, not just among linguists. It

is obvious that N&R both deeply care about the issue, approaching it with a sense of urgency.

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