

Abandoning Endangered Languages: Ethical Loneliness, Language Oppression, and Social Justice

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Language endangerment is political. Speakers and signers of Indigenous and minoritized languages have repeatedly explained that their languages are endangered due to failures of social justice—the oppression, marginalization, stigmatization, exclusion, deprivation, and so on—that take place in the context of imperial, colonial, and nationalist domination (Davis 2017; Mac Ionnrachtaigh 2013; Jacob 2013; Taff et al. 2018; Thiong’o [1981] 2004). The field of endangerment linguistics (Crystal 2018), however, has mostly failed to hear this, and has continued searching for the “drivers” and “causes” of language endangerment while seeking solutions primarily in technology and pedagogy. Meanwhile, critiques of endangerment linguistics from within applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology have largely failed to articulate a meaningful (programmatic, institutionalized) alternative to endangerment linguistics that takes into account what signers and speakers of endangered languages continue to tell us about the political nature of language endangerment. As a result of this impasse, emerging research around the concept of linguistic justice (e.g., Avineri et al. 2019;

Flores 2017; Piller 2016), which holds significant potential for theorizing and addressing language endangerment, has so far not been applied to the issue.

The failure of linguists to see politics, and of justice-oriented scholars to see endangered languages, constitutes what I call a *state of abandonment* for the signers and speakers of endangered languages: a lacuna where several disciplines intersect, conspiring to deny users of endangered languages the theoretically informed analyses and comparative perspective they need to generate effective methods for addressing “language endangerment.” Given that this oversight occurs in the context of a refusal to sincerely hear the voices of the linguistically oppressed, we can describe the predicament of users of endangered languages as a form of ethical loneliness: “the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard” (Stauffer 2015, 1).¹ Addressing the abandonment of speakers and signers of endangered languages, and their ethical loneliness, requires us to develop an approach to language endangerment that builds on previous research in endangerment linguistics but abandons the “endangerment” framing in favor of a social justice approach.

This reframing is crucial to intervening in a global crisis. The most recent estimate, and it is likely a conservative one, is that just under half the world’s languages—46 percent—are endangered (Campbell and Belew 2018). This is historically unique. Never before in the span of human history has such a significant proportion of languages disappeared from the face of the earth so quickly. The word crisis is an apt description of this situation. If the basic social, economic, and political arrangements currently prevailing in our world today persist, half of the world’s languages will be gone within the next century. And since endangerment is not a static predicament, since languages that are stable today can become endangered tomorrow, and since

¹ Stauffer (2015, 2) goes on to clarify: “Such loneliness is so named because it is a form of social abandonment that can be imposed only by multiple ethical lapses on the part of human beings.”

we know that current arrangements are, on the whole, hostile to diversity, then we have reason to believe that the loss will not cease at half the world's languages.

Although users of Indigenous and minoritized languages have long been aware of threats to their individual languages, linguists did not begin studying this situation until the middle of the twentieth century. One of the first articles on the topic comes from Morris Swadesh, in 1948. He begins his “Sociologic Notes on Obsolescent Languages” by situating contemporary language loss as part of a broader historical trend that has included the disappearance of languages like Sumerian, Etruscan, and Pictish. In doing so, he simultaneously situates “language obsolescence” (a loaded term if ever there was) as something historically normal and therefore also worthy of scientific inquiry. Swadesh’s priority in this article is to provoke data collection,² a call that was largely not taken up seriously until the late 1970s as part of the emergence of sociolinguistics (Heller and McElhinny 2017). A key publication in this regard was a 1977 special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* on language death (Dressler and Wodak-Leodtler 1977). This research program on language death and obsolescence continued through the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Dorian 1981; Dorian 1992), but unlike later developments that led to the formation of endangerment linguistics as we now know it, never included an element of social mobilization in addition to a research agenda.

The combination of a research program with one of social mobilization first began to emerge in 1987 when, at the 14th International Congress of Linguists, it was decided that the 15th Congress would take “endangered languages” as one of its main themes (Wurm 1996). In 1991, in preparation for the 15th Congress, a series of articles on language endangerment was published in *Diogenes*, the journal of the International Council of Philosophy and Humanistic

² The concluding line of the article reads, “The main purpose of the present paper is therefore to enter a plea to field workers to seek and report data that may some day make possible a serious general study” (Swadesh 1948, 235).

Studies (Brenzinger, Heine, and Sommer 1991; Kibrik 1991; Wurm 1991; Zepeda and Hill 1991). Some of these articles were also published in a book that same year, titled *Endangered Languages* (Robins and Uhlenbeck 1991). Also in that year, Ken Hale, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, organized a panel on endangered languages at the Linguistic Society of America's annual conference. Papers from that panel were published the following year, in 1992, as a special issue of the journal *Language* (Hale et al. 1992).

This turning point in the early 1990s represents a foundational moment when research and social mobilization were brought together, a situation that has characterized endangerment linguistics ever since. Endangerment linguistics has sought to raise public awareness of the global scale of language endangerment and loss and to mobilize resources in defense of linguistic diversity. This dual focus on research and outreach is built into the term “endangered language” itself. The term was selected to mirror the concept of “endangered species,” and in doing so aimed to draw both methodologies and moral legitimacy from the global environmental movement. The metaphor of endangerment thus aimed to produce both a research program that mirrored environmental science and related disciplines, as well as a social program that would make language endangerment a matter of public concern. Taken in tandem, the aims of the research and social programs were to mobilize people and resources and arrest the decline in global linguistic diversity.

As a *research* program, endangerment linguistics has been an undoubted success. The success of this program can be seen in the development of fundamental infrastructure for a field of study. First among this infrastructure, we might note the existence of several reference works and textbooks, which attempt to represent the state of the field and its development (e.g., Austin and Sallabank 2011; Evans 2011; Thomason 2015). Secondly, these books are complemented by

a variety of popular books that have helped popularize the study of endangerment linguistics and linked its research and social programs (Abley 2005; Crystal 2000; Harrison 2010; Nettle and Romaine 2000). Third, we can note the existence of two journals (both open access) dedicated to research on endangerment linguistics, *Language Documentation and Conservation* and *Language Documentation and Description*. Fourth, there are also professional organizations and committees for endangered languages, which typically blend research and advocacy, such as the Foundation for Endangered Languages, the Linguistic Society of America's Committee on Endangered Languages and Their Preservation, the Endangered Languages Alliance, the Endangered Languages Fund, Living Languages (formerly the Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity), and so on. All of this research and advocacy infrastructure is supported by funding. Some of these organizations provide funding to communities, while all of them rely on funding from other sources, sometimes from organizations that focus explicitly on endangered languages. Taken together, this research infrastructure has enabled endangerment linguistics to be established as a field; a definable, Google-able term; and discrete body of knowledge with an associated community of practice.

More than simply asserting and reproducing its own existence, however, endangerment linguistics has also produced significant advances in knowledge. These advances can be summarized as being broadly of two types: descriptive and interventionist.

Descriptive developments have aimed to provide an overview of both global linguistic diversity and endangerment. The production of statistics about the number of languages of the world, the distribution of endangerment among those languages, and the distribution of both diversity and endangerment in space have been central to the task of endangerment linguistics (Anderson 2011; Axelsen and Manrubia 2014; Gorenflo et al. 2012; Loh and Harmon 2005;

Maffi 2005; Nettle 2009). The spatial element of this descriptive research has seen improving efforts to map global linguistic diversity and to correlate it with environmental and other variables, such as economic development. It has produced not only counts of the world's languages but also estimates as to how those languages are divided between countries and regions. There have been simultaneous efforts to systematically develop methods for assessing the extent of endangerment of individual languages. Building on efforts from the late 1970s, frameworks for assessing “linguistic vitality” have been adopted by UNESCO (2003, 2011) and continue to be developed today (Lee and Van Way 2016). These efforts to assess language vitality have coalesced with efforts to provide descriptive accounts of language diversity in the concept of “linguistic diversity hotspots,” which aims to identify regions that are home to a high number of endangered languages (Anderson 2011). Overall, the map, census, survey, rubric, checklist, and statistic have been the hallmarks of descriptive research in endangerment linguistics.

In terms of interventionist or applied research, there have been two primary developments. The first relates to the emergence of documentary linguistics and associated fields of archiving (for a summary of developments in this field, see Seifart et al. 2018). Documentary linguistics emerged as, essentially, a new approach to collecting linguistic data. Developed with the possibility of language loss in mind, language documentation aims to create a rich and flexible record of a language through the collection, via digital audio-visual tools, of “texts” in language—conversations, monologues, and formal and informal uses of language, across a variety of genres. This data-driven approach has seen the emergence of archives, networks of archives, and discussions around access protocols and metadata, all aiming to create a sort of

digital Noah's Ark of language that is rich, richly documented, accessible to all, and available for multiple purposes.

One of these purposes is language revitalization—an umbrella term that covers a variety of activities from the reawakening of languages no longer spoken to the support for large and well-resourced languages that are losing speakers (Hinton, Huss, and Roche 2018). Although language revitalization is an increasingly interdisciplinary field that covers everything from psychotherapy to archival research, the primary thrust of this research has been pedagogical. It has focused on how languages can be taught, learned, and transmitted, investigating a variety of innovative pedagogies, institutional arrangements, and technologies that bolster the recovery, learning, and teaching of endangered languages.

To an extent that this extremely brief overview can only begin to make clear, endangerment linguistics has, over the past thirty years, made enormous advances in not only creating an institutional apparatus to produce and reproduce itself as a field but also in developing descriptive and applied tools for understanding and intervening in the global language-endangerment crisis.

Nonetheless, we need to honestly confront the fact that endangerment linguistics has had little to no impact on global language endangerment. Linguists already know this. For example, in the conclusion of a recent paper reviewing twenty-five years of language documentation research, Seifart et al. (2018) take stock of the many important developments in documentation and archiving during this period and the advances this has allowed in linguistics as a science. After describing this impressive progress, they begin their final paragraph by admitting that, “As far as endangerment is concerned, however, little has changed: language loss is accelerating under the steamrollers of nation-state consolidation, fast development, habitat erosion, and

globalization” (336). There are two things to note here. First is something I want to highlight for later, namely, the list of explanatory mechanisms offered in the second half of the sentence, the so-called steamrollers. But the second and main point here, which is not in any way controversial, is that endangerment linguistics has not only failed to slow global language loss but has in fact grown hand in hand with its acceleration.

The limited impact of endangerment linguistics is also acknowledged in the field that is most directly concerned with practical outcomes: language revitalization. Even in the case of languages where resources are relatively abundant, and where interventionist measures have a long history, there is also often a sense among communities where languages are being revitalized that desired outcomes are not being achieved. Despite the profusion of helpful new technologies, the ever-expanding pedagogical frontier, the increasingly dense and expansive networks of language-revitalization institutions and practitioners, and the profusion of projects in both number and variety, there is nonetheless a widespread sense of something missing from the picture.

I want to be very careful to delimit the significance of this absence. Language revitalization is not “failing”; even small interventions can have profound effects in the lives of individuals and communities, and the goal of complete language restoration and normalization should not be the sole benchmark for the success of language-revitalization programs. What I am referring to is a sense that there are persistent boundaries and obstacles that limit the capacity of these programs to bring about desired outcomes—and these boundaries are not simply about resources. This sense of frustration is captured by Māori language activist Wharehuia Milroy (interview in Winitana 2011, 311–12) when he says:

We must write down our language. Well, we've written the Māori language down and it still continues to die. We must produce a dictionary. Same again, we have, and what, it's still on the decline. We must produce people who are expert in the language. And we have, yet it hasn't halted the regression. We must produce expert linguists who are also expert teachers. No joy there, the language is still on the slide. We must establish bilingual schools, English and Māori in our case. All done, but still no difference. We must let the schools teach the language—we do, but no luck there. We must produce our cultural arts as catalysts for awakening the language. There's our carvings and our artworks, but still the language hasn't returned. We must bring in the international language experts—the likes of Fishman and Spolsky—who have all been here, and not one shred of difference. We must take our recording machines and capture the words of our old people as they fall from their mouths. We must visit the sound and film archives and gather their speeches. All done, I'm afraid, and the language hasn't budged. We must produce CDs—again, all completed, but still no difference with the language.

In drawing attention to this situation, where endangerment linguistics has expanded as a field while its object of study has diminished, I do not mean to dismiss the whole enterprise of endangerment linguistics as futile and failed. Nor am I suggesting that we should expect endangerment linguistics to show clear impacts in the same way that, for example, the growth in the ozone hole was reversed by the ban on chlorofluorocarbon production following the achievement of scientific consensus on this issue.

Rather, I think that endangerment linguistics, despite its advances in describing and attempting to intervene in language endangerment, has largely failed to produce meaningful

explanatory accounts of how language endangerment occurs. Seifart et al.'s above-mentioned list of language “steamrollers” (globalization, habitat erosion, economic development, and state-building) is typical of the sort of anemic logic that animates the conversation in endangerment linguistics: languages seem to be spontaneously lost through autonomous and inevitable processes and trends. The problem with this logic is that the means of effective community response are unclear. If urbanization causes language loss, should people flee the city to save their languages? If globalization causes language loss, should speakers and signers of endangered languages demand isolationism? If economic development causes language loss, is poverty a solution?

Endangerment linguistics is not entirely to blame for its lack of a rich, meaningful way to describe the causes of language endangerment. This is also due to its reception by and interaction with other fields.

Many readers will be familiar with the criticisms that have been leveled at endangerment linguistics, first and foremost in the volume by Duchêne and Heller (2007) on “discourses of endangerment,” and more since then (for a recent example, see Costa 2016). Primary among these is the idea that endangerment linguistics is essentialist: that in conceiving of languages as bounded and stable objects of study, it overlooks the dynamic, fluid, and fuzzy nature of language, a perspective promoted in sociolinguistics by what Pennycook (2016) calls the “trans-super-poly-metro movement.” Embedded within this anti-essentialist critique are concerns regarding how discourses of endangerment can be appropriated as legitimation for domination and can too easily articulate with discourses of racial and biological essentialism. These critiques are in many ways insightful and correct.

However, I also think it is necessary to problematize the failure of these critiques to provide any sort of alternative to the biological frames of endangerment linguistics. This lack of alternatives occurs at a range of levels. There has been no emergence of a counter-field to endangerment linguistics, nor the creation of institutions, platforms, and funding structures this would entail. There have been no alternative discourses proposed. The critique of language endangerment has been a sort of pure denunciation, aiming to undermine and delegitimize the foundations of the endangerment problematic. Following from this, the critique of endangerment linguistics has also failed to provide a basis for action for signers and speakers of endangered languages. It isn't clear, for example, what they should *do* with the knowledge that essentialism is bad. The critique of endangerment linguistics has, therefore, failed to provide alternative ways of thinking about and addressing language endangerment.

Meanwhile, as endangerment linguistics has been expanding as a field, there has been a simultaneous growth in a variety of fields, all loosely affiliated with various forms of identity politics—what Nancy Fraser (1996), Charles Taylor (1994), and others refer to as the politics of recognition—and which are often based in critiques of colonialism, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other systematic forms of oppression (Kinna and Gordon 2019). Such fields, I argue, have an important role to play in helping us understand how language endangerment is produced. However, the critique of endangerment linguistics as essentialist, on the one hand, and linguists' aversion to political questions, on the other, has largely isolated endangerment linguistics from these developments (and vice versa), producing a state of abandonment for signers and speakers of endangered languages. Two examples will hopefully help demonstrate this.

First, we may note the rise of the concept of intersectionality since the early 1990s, originating in the work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989). Crenshaw argues that multiple forms of oppression intersect in the lives of particular people, so that, for example, women of color experience different forms of oppression from men of color and from white women. The expansion of this intersectional framework as a binding force that enables us to talk about interactions between multiple forms of domination has produced a recurrent trope in the social justice literature, taking the form of a claim that a particular axis of oppression also intersects with other axes—X intersects with A, B, and C. We therefore see, for example, in the work of philosopher Kate Manne (2018, 13), the claim that the framework of misogyny as a form of domination should be understood in relation to other forms of domination, “including racisms, xenophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on.” In the countless examples of this formula one may encounter, language is inevitably excluded. This leaves us with three possible interpretations: (1) language is irrelevant to a given context because the context is monolingual, which is never true; (2) language difference never serves as a contour for relations of power, which is also patently false, or, more realistically; or (3) languages have simply been left out of conversations around intersectionality.

A second example will hopefully suffice to demonstrate how these ongoing and growing conversations around recognition and justice have passed over the issue of language endangerment. In the past ten years, there has emerged a fractured literature in which the term “linguistic justice” and its variants appear (e.g., Mowbray 2012; Piller 2016; van Parijis 2011). Although tied to numerous and often opposed political projects (for example, liberalism versus identitarian politics), and emerging from a range of disciplinary perspectives (including linguistic anthropology, applied linguistics, and political science), these works are all united by the desire

to explore how language is one of many contours of injustice—that linguistic difference can and does serve as a means of inclusion and exclusion, for oppression and discrimination. They are further united by a common horizon of exclusion: although linguistic (in)justice is often spoken of in global terms in these works, no attempt is made to employ the descriptions of global linguistic diversity developed by endangerment linguistics; discussions are usually restricted to familiar First World settings and languages at or near the center of the world system. Secondly, the issue of language endangerment as a form of linguistic injustice is never broached. Instead, a range of what we might call “First World linguistic problems” are addressed. This can be seen in the opening passage of the recent volume *Language and Social Justice in Practice*, which reads, “Language is a central concern in contemporary conversations surrounding social justice, as evident in issues as diverse as bilingual education, racial epithets, gendered pronouns, immigration discourses, sports team mascots, and signage in public space” (Avineri et al. 2019, 1). The loss of half the world’s languages and the concordant oppression of their associated communities are not, apparently, concerns for social justice.

What I am arguing, therefore, is that while scholars working from the perspective of endangerment linguistics have failed to adequately explain, and thus address, the causes of language endangerment, scholars working in the social justice tradition, including those working on issues of language justice, have consistently overlooked the issue of language endangerment. So, while archives grow and revitalization techniques expand, language endangerment continues. And as our theoretical tool kit for understanding the complexities and multiplicities of oppression expands, language remains constantly outside this research space, and language endangerment continues.

This intersection of disciplinary oversights has produced a state of abandonment of signers and speakers of endangered languages. This abandonment, furthermore, represents a failure to hear what many of these people have long asserted: that languages are lost through domination, oppression, and subordination—by the denial of social justice. This abandonment, and its maintenance through enduring and repeated moral lapses, enforces a condition of what Stauffer (2015, 2) calls ethical loneliness on users of endangered languages: moral injury and political harm exacerbated by the “failure of just-minded people to hear well.”

Addressing the global language crisis requires that we address this state of abandonment. Doing so, I argue, requires that we radically reformulate the way that we think and talk about language endangerment. Essential to this approach is that we abandon the language and metaphor of endangerment and replace it with a critical approach that centers the political: language oppression (Taff et al. 2018) rather than language endangerment. At the same time, we need to abandon commitments to anti-essentialist critiques of endangerment linguistics insofar as they inhibit meaningful engagement with the realities of the global language crisis and the concrete harms of language loss. Doing so will create space for theoretical conversations about the production of language oppression and how it can be resisted.

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