

Book review

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José Antonio Flores Farfán and Fernando Ramallo, editors: *New perspectives on endangered languages*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010. 161 pp.

New perspectives on endangered languages: bridging gaps between sociolinguistics, documentation and language revitalization is the first volume in the new series called Culture and Language Use edited by Gunter Senft and published by John Benjamins. The book contains eight chapters with a preface and a short postface by the editors.

In Chapter 1 (“Exploring links between documentation, sociolinguistics and language revitalization: an introduction”), the editors, José Antonio Flores Farfán and Fernando Ramallo, offer an overview of the primary goal of the book, which is to define an agenda for combining language documentation, sociolinguistics and language revitalization. While a great amount of energy has been put into documenting languages throughout the world in the form of “received documentation or documentation with a major concern for scientific description”, very little effort has been spent on “active documentation or documentation oriented to the community” (p. 1). The main criticism put forth in this chapter regards the methodology of linguistic research and its impact on language documentation (i.e. the lack of interactional data and contextualization of speech, the use of a unique “best informant,” etc.). The authors point out the hierarchical asymmetry that exists between the linguist and his or her informant. Flores Farfán provides some examples from colonial dictionaries of Nahuatl where this relation has been encoded in the lexical entries. The authors argue that such an asymmetry is not only problematic in terms of ethics but also in terms of the kinds of linguistic materials collected: hypercorrections, purisms, neologisms and artificial examples. If we can agree that the typical asymmetrical relationship between the linguist and the informant is prone to produce such results, these issues rest eventually on the integrity and the commitment of the researcher(s) to his work ethic and towards the members of the community. The alternative proposed by Grinevald (2003) or Benedicto et al.

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1 (2002) of having fieldwork done *by* speakers of the language also has its prob-
2 lems. Assuming that the native linguists are well trained, there are still some
3 political issues, such as exploiting financial gain.

4 Alexandra Aikhenvald (Chapter 2 “The social life of a language: will
5 Manambu survive?”) deals with language contact and language change in one
6 of the regions of the world with the greatest linguistic diversity: Papua New
7 Guinea. The author takes the example of the Manambu language where she
8 conducted long-term fieldwork. Although currently spoken by 2,500 people,
9 there are no monolingual speakers and children acquire Tok Pisin (an English
10 Creole, the lingua franca of the region) as their first language. English, to a
11 certain degree, but mostly Tok Pisin are replacing more and more the indige-
12 nous Manambu language. Because of the sociolinguistic situation, Tok Pisin
13 (TP) is attractive in various ways: (1) it helps to disambiguate polysemy of
14 Manambu expressions; (2) it has a directive function for being the language of
15 authority (from adults to children but also among adults); (3) it helps filling
16 perceived gaps, notably at the grammatical and pragmatic levels, finally, (4) TP
17 forms can be more expressive than their Manambu equivalents. It is obvious
18 from Aikhenvald’s examples that the shift to TP has altered indigenous catego-
19 ries and could hence be considered a case of cultural loss. For instance, the
20 common regional grammatical codification of totemic categories in address
21 terms tend to disappear with the use of TP terms, along with the use of the
22 complex Manambu kinship system. The strength of Aikhenvald’s chapter lies
23 in numerous ethnographic examples. Not only do these examples vividly il-
24 lustrate the linguistic situation in the community but the chapter itself provides
25 a concrete illustration of the proposed agenda of the book, that is, to increase the
26 awareness of linguists towards documenting language use, linguistic change
27 and revitalization. The chapter ends on a rather positive note. The author points
28 out that, although “English and Tok Pisin are there to stay” (p. 26), because of
29 specific economic and sociological conditions, old urban Manambu speakers
30 tend to return to their native village as positive role-models, promoting again
31 the use of the language. It seems that Manambu, after all, “is not as endangered
32 as one might think” (p. 26).

33 In Chapter 3 (“The private and the public in documentation and revitaliza-
34 tion”), Nancy Dorian proposes a reflection on the issues of private vs. public
35 settings in linguistic fieldwork and revitalization using examples from various
36 speech communities around the world. As other contributors, Dorian stresses
37 the increase in fieldwork practices since the 1990s: the lone linguist with pen
38 and paper transformed into a highly equipped (sometimes multidisciplinary)
39 team with powerful tools and resources for documenting language and prac-
40 tices. This evolution was not without its problems. A central one is obtaining
41 informant(s) and/or community consent. With a single fieldworker, individual
42 trust was usually easily gained but the publicity and the fact that documenta-

1 tion programs tend to be large-scale makes things more problematic: obtaining
 2 formal consent from a whole group with political and social rivalries can be
 3 difficult, not to mention the community's own desire to orient or control the
 4 documentation process. In discussing the problem of schooling, Dorian raises
 5 the issue of spheres of language practices and of revitalization settings. Formal
 6 teaching of the native language, especially for non-written languages spoken in
 7 small rural settings is highly problematic. The author, citing Messing (2003)'s
 8 study on Nahuatl, frames the problem in terms of intimacy and solidarity be-
 9 tween speakers, although I think the real issue has to do with the setting and the
 10 historical development of language: school is an old institution in European
 11 contexts with a dedicated vocabulary and specific forms of interactions which
 12 may not exist in other cultures. However, Dorian insightfully raises two funda-
 13 mental issues of language formalization for revitalization: coinage of new
 14 terms and codification. If formalization benefits language diffusion and learn-
 15 ing, it can also prevent intergenerational communication. However, some al-
 16 ternatives or middle-ground contexts exist such as the *Áyimo* case where some
 17 traditional practices (e.g. carving, canoe-building) have been incorporated in
 18 the teaching programs (Wurm 1999), giving back linguistic interactions a set-
 19 ting where the language can be used at its full potential.

20 In Chapter 4 ("Bridging linguistic research and linguistic documentation:
 21 the Kuikuro experience [Brazil]"), Bruna Franchetto tells us about her experi-
 22 ence with the Kuikuro speech community in Upper Xingu in Brazil. Franchetto's
 23 narration raises some important issues about language and culture docu-
 24 mentation and the perception of the researcher in the field, illustrating a point
 25 that was raised in Dorian's chapter. The Kuikuro case is a particularly interest-
 26 ing example of a local appropriation of documentation methods and also, the
 27 aims of a documentation project. In a culture where knowledge is traditionally
 28 subject to intellectual property (speakers are the "owners" of narrations), it was
 29 not a big step for the Kuikuro speakers to be able to put a price on their words,
 30 especially in the face of the White's tradition that transforms these oral goods
 31 into mercantile books. In 2003, the Kuikuro decided to conduct their own docu-
 32 mentation project. Even with some formation in linguistics and anthropology,
 33 documenting one's own culture remains a challenge. It implies a reification of
 34 cultural and linguistic practices, as well as a conceptual and political reinter-
 35 pretation and reinvention of these practices. As Franchetto points out, one main
 36 issue lies in the shortcut in knowledge transmission allowed by technology
 37 (that dispenses memorization and long-term apprenticeship) and in the prob-
 38 lem of folklorization which can lead to linguistic and cultural "salvation and
 39 destruction at one and the same time" (p. 61).

40 Lenore Grenoble in Chapter 5 ("Language vitality and revitalization in the
 41 Arctic") presents in great detail (and with an impressive number of statistics)
 42 the very atypical case of Evenki, a language spoken in Siberia by 5,000 speakers

1 but spread out over 3,000,000 square kilometers! The very low density of the
2 population and its distribution in many small villages (including a certain
3 degree of nomadism) present great challenges for language maintenance and
4 even more for revitalization. A crucial issue is dialect variation which poses
5 problems for the formalization of the language and the creation of teaching
6 materials. Extant material was written in an extinct dialect making it virtually
7 unusable. In addition to the lack of training for teachers and the insufficiency
8 of financial as well as human resources, revitalization is a real challenge for
9 Evenki. Today, most children learn Russian as a first language and are literate
10 in Russian.

11 Peter Muysken's chapter is entitled "The demise and attempted revival of
12 Uchumataqu (Uru): values and actors". He retraces in a well-documented fash-
13 ion what led to the disappearance of the Uchumataqu language spoken in the
14 Bolivian *altiplano*. Relying on Brenzinger and Dimmendaal's (1992) catego-
15 ries, Muysken shows that, although quite resilient despite population decline,
16 the Uchumataqu language failed to survive because of external causes (urban
17 migration, economic and socio-cultural restructuring, population decrease, ex-
18 ogamy and ecology) as well as internal factors (speakers' language use, atti-
19 tudes and strategies). Basically a number of ecologic and socio-economic fac-
20 tors reduced the size of the speech community that had no choice but to create
21 strong marital links with the neighboring Aymara community in order to sur-
22 vive. Introducing Aymara women into the house turned out to be fatal for the
23 Uchumataqu language. It gave rise to a new kind of socialization for children
24 that led to an asymmetrical bilingualism (Uchumataqu speakers also knew Ay-
25 mara but not the other way around) and ultimately to the extinction of Uchu-
26 mataqu. Muysken puts language ideology and language maintenance in per-
27 spective in considering the "ecology of language", as well as the various actors
28 involved and their (often contradictory) motivations.

29 In her chapter (Chapter 7 "Linguistic vitality in the Awetí indigenous com-
30 munity: a case study from the Upper Xingu multilingual area"), Sabine Reiter
31 describes what could be described as a "natural linguistic laboratory of lan-
32 guage change" in the Upper Xingu Region in Brazil. She considers the case of
33 an Awetí village that decided in 2002 to split into two. Supported by a DoBeS
34 project, her study, carried out between 2000 and 2006, allows her to draw some
35 preliminary conclusions about the evolution of the language in the two com-
36 munities (although she primarily worked in one village because of limitations
37 by the local authorities). In Xingu, interethnic marriages are frequent and mul-
38 tilingualism inside the house is the norm. To settle the dilemma between ethnic
39 and linguistic identity, the local policy states that the language spoken in the
40 village and acquired as first language by the majority of the children defines
41 the ethnic group of the individual. Under these conditions, outsider spouses
42 acquire a passive knowledge of the other spouse's language and children from

1 mixed couples grow up bilingual. At the moment, Awetí is still spoken in
2 traditional settings and is not currently endangered. However, the split of the
3 speech community (that represents only 160 members) may lead to linguistic
4 and cultural decline.

5 The various contributors of the book point to some crucial issues associated
6 with language documentation and its impact on revitalization measures. The
7 force of the various contributions can certainly be attributed to the concrete
8 case studies they provide and the variety of the contributors' background. What
9 strikes the reader is the diversity of cases encountered around the world. Al-
10 though the same issues appear over and over again (e.g. speaker's involvement
11 in the documentation process, role of the researcher, revitalization process,
12 purism, language ideology, etc.), each case is particular and must be treated in
13 its own right. In other words, the book does not propose a unique miracle solu-
14 tion to rescue languages, for there is none.

15 A crucial issue only touched upon in passing is the question "why bother
16 trying to revitalize and preserve languages?" Muysken raises the question of
17 what a language is worth to mankind but does not answer it. Why would lan-
18 guage unification (i.e. language loss) be a bad thing? In the Bible, linguistic
19 diversity is presented as a curse from God on mankind preventing them to
20 achieve their own will. As pointed out by de Swaan (2004), linguists, although
21 they like the idea of small groups speaking a minority language, benefit from
22 being a part of an international speech community. Furthermore, as mentioned
23 by many contributors, speakers themselves are not always keen on saving,
24 learning or transmitting their own language. Most of the time speakers them-
25 selves are the forces behind language change. In a situation where the "world
26 is a village", language diversity represents more of a barrier than a benefit.
27 Finally, the analogy of language "death" can be misleading: speakers do not
28 die, nor does language. People simply shift from one communicational code to
29 another, usually a more widely spoken language. Although there are numerous
30 arguments for why linguistic diversity is important, Enfield (2011) points out
31 that the justification for language preservation cannot rely on a scientific argu-
32 mentation but only on a political and/or an ethical choice. But in language
33 revitalization, ethical considerations are not enough and, as noted by several
34 contributors, keeping a language alive should imply some concrete everyday
35 benefits for the speakers. One problem is that the benefits for the speech com-
36 munities are often revealed in the long run, while short-term advantages usu-
37 ally promote language shift. Successful cases of language revitalization always
38 imply some practical (often economic) issues and/or strong political or ideo-
39 logical pressure. Muysken mentions the case of Bolivian Teko where land-
40 rights were attributed to speakers of the language. In the case of Euskera
41 (Basque), maintenance of the language involved financial support for workers
42 of the local administration to learn the language as well as political and social

1 decisions (in imposing acquisition of Euskera at school in the Basque Autono-
2 mous Community).

3 On the other hand, language maintenance in a world that globalizes at such
4 a fast pace represents a strong barrier against assimilation, allowing for iden-
5 tity preservation and the support of political independence.

6 We should thus be careful not to confuse the purposes of this book that is,
7 combining language documentation and language revitalization. Although this
8 aim is certainly well-intentioned, there are reasons to wonder how compatible
9 these goals are in actual fact. Revitalization, formalization and education are
10 political actions and they can hardly be compatible with the scientific aim of
11 describing and analyzing linguistic phenomena, while avoiding the observer's
12 paradox. From the various chapters, it seems that linguistic teamwork and
13 involvement of members of the speech communities might allow a well-
14 balanced division of labor and action that can only be positive in the long run
15 for all parties. A new orientation in the language documentation process raises
16 then the problematic redefinition of the place of the researcher and the (poten-
17 tial) impact of his/her work in the language revitalization process and on
18 speakers' attitudes and behaviors. With respect to this issue, Dorian cites in her
19 chapter Dixon (1991) and Terrill (2002) who consider that any scientific work
20 is potentially a good thing, enhancing the language's visibility and triggering a
21 positive attitude from the speakers. In the fight for revitalization, a grammar
22 can become a political weapon and it seems that linguistic documentation
23 should be (or is) ultimately a political act, although always an indirect one. The
24 crucial point is for the linguist working in such contexts to always bear in mind
25 that his or her scientific work potentially implies the revitalization of the lan-
26 guage of the speakers (s)he work with.

27 *New perspectives on endangered languages* is a book every linguist and
28 especially linguists involved in fieldwork should read. It seems that the time of
29 the lone linguist doing elicitation for his own sake is over and speech commu-
30 nities, while they begin to master modern technology, make their own voices
31 heard more and more.

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