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Reflections on public awareness

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In this reflection, I repeat Michael Krauss's 1992 call for linguists of all kinds to be active in creating public awareness of language endangerment, and more importantly at this stage, in motivating global attitudinal changes in support of language diversity. I purposely do not distinguish between academic and non-academic, community and non-community linguists, requiring that we all participate in this call. I distinguish different target publics, namely the endangered or minoritized language community public and the majority language public in terms of message and response. I then briefly outline past and present efforts in varying media that are part of creating awareness and action on a global scale. I focus on integration of media and message, stressing that we must be able to provide a positive vision of a linguistically diverse world and a means for the general public, especially youth, to participate in its creation.

1. Introduction In Hale et al. 1992, after presenting the eye-opening estimate that without intervention up to 90% of the world's language would disappear by the end of the 21st century, Michael Krauss asked, "What are we linguists doing to prepare for this or to prevent this catastrophic destruction of the linguistic world?" (p. 7). One way that linguists could prepare, and the way most suited to linguists, was to document endangered languages and to document in a way that benefitted both community endeavors and linguistic science. Krauss's call to prepare thus signaled a slow but steady restoration of field methods, or *practicum*, courses in linguistics departments. Himmelmann 1998 greatly impacted the legitimacy of descriptive linguistics. By disentangling and systematizing the terms *documentation* and *description*, he escalated the growth from what a few dedicated linguists were doing into a distinct subfield of linguistics, now called documentary and descriptive linguistics. Himmelmann's stated motivation for systematizing the field was his concern for endangered languages (p. 161). As the subfield has grown, so has public awareness of language endangerment and loss.

The second part of Krauss's question, what we are doing to *prevent* the catastrophic loss of languages, is much harder. Many academic linguists come to the field of documentation and description through a love for the languages themselves. Most

come to language revitalization or reclamation by earnest commitment to and with an endangered language community and community members they work with. However, prevention is inherently tied to our ability to interact not with language data or with a community of speakers and advocates that share similar if not the same goals, but with the general public.

Unfortunately, the general public still does not usually share our love of language itself, and in many cases feels little or no sympathy towards language loss and the people who are affected. The general public creates donors, and we do need money to implement language revitalization. The general public creates local, national, and international politicians who create policy, and we need supporting policy to affect language reclamation. The general public, most importantly, can create a climate for language revitalization and diversity to flourish. If we are successful in creating new generations of speakers and renewing healthy language communities but the speakers of majority languages are not accepting of language diversity, then small languages will always struggle to maintain a foothold. Without a wider climate of support, we are at best creating at-risk enclaves, and at worst creating margins of future conflict.

A quick view of recent comments posted on-line after endangered language-related articles, even in the more educated outlets such as the BBC and the New York Times, reveal common attitudes towards endangered languages and their speakers. Leaving outright xenophobic and racist comments aside (and there is a lot of it), the negative attitudes fall into three main groups: 1) Those who still think, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that a common language creates less conflict, 2) those who cling to the discredited views of Social Darwinism and believe that language loss is simply the way of the world, and that languages will die off to 'stronger' languages, cultures and economies, so there is nothing to be done about it. This is often expressed by 'that's progress' or 'just get over it' or 'the will of God,' and 3) those who see and perhaps understand the issues, but are apathetic because they do not see how language loss impacts them.

Prevention begins with awareness, but ultimately, we must change the attitudes and behavior of majority language speakers, especially those in predominately monolingual societies and spaces such as the internet. But how do we linguists mobilize a global society when the underlying causes of language endangerment are colonialism, poverty, xenophobia, and racism? How do we combat the economics of globalization that push individuals and communities to adopt majority languages? Linguists are not trained to do this, nor do many of us feel comfortable in the role of spokespersons for a cause. Yet, we have to. We cannot live in this time and be linguists and do nothing. Even if it feels very small, if each one of us does something, it will add up.

In this reflection, when I implore action or give credit to action with the words *we* or *linguists*, I am not speaking narrowly of academically trained career linguists. By linguists, I mean language practitioners (endangered language community members working on language outside of academia), community linguists working in academia, non-community linguists working with communities (revitalization/reclamation) and those working with endangered languages (documentation and description), and even non-community linguists who do not work with communities or endangered languages. We all bear responsibility for educating the general public to the causes and effects of language loss, and the tireless efforts and milestones achieved in reversing language shift. That being said, since language practitioners and community linguists are often overworked and over stretched in their own communities, academic linguists working in majority-language settings should take up the liaison role of raising public awareness.

By *general public*, I mean speakers of majority languages whose lives are not normally touched by causes or effects of language loss but can be supportive of language diversity and cultural plurality around them and can become agents in ending discriminatory practices and preferential treatments.

My linguistic career has led me to two very public positions, first as the Curator of Native American Languages at the Sam Noble Museum in Norman, Oklahoma, and second as Curator of Cultural and Linguistic Revitalization at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in Washington, DC. Museums are inherently institutions of public education. More and more museums have permanent and temporary galleries dedicated to endangered languages. Most are in collaboration with communities, many include youth participation, and some have accompanying education materials. For a few examples, see The Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2013 *One World Many Voices* program,¹ Royal BC Museum *Our Living Languages*,² *First Peoples* at the Melbourne Museum,³ and The Canadian Language Museum includes a helpful map of language museums around the world.⁴ The yearly Oklahoma Native American Youth Language Fair at the Sam Noble Museum includes the mission of presenting living languages. Lena Herzog's *Last Whispers: Oratorio for Vanishing Voices, Collapsing Universes, and a Fallen Tree* is an immersive installation that premiered at the British Museum in 2016 and is traveling to other major museums.⁵ Planet Word, a museum dedicated to language is opening in 2019 in Washington, DC, and will have sections about endangered languages.⁶

As an employee of publicly funded museums, I have taken on a role to educate the public about the causes and effects of language shift, the amazing strides achieved in communities and schools, and the positive steps that all people can play in reversing language shift. I have learned, and am still learning, how to present linguistic and cultural issues to the public. I hope to share some of my lessons and thoughts in this reflection.

2. From awareness to mobilization Twenty years ago, the wake-up call was mainly aimed at linguists, and 'the public' was mainly endangered and minoritized language communities. As with the linguistic community, many communities did not fully realize the extent of language shift happening at home, let alone what their communities were struggling with was shared by minoritized and small language communities around the world. Communities did not understand the ramifications of generations of school-aged children not speaking the language in the home, or of having only middle-aged or older first language speakers. While it seems nearly impossible today, there are still endangered language communities that are not aware of their language loss. These are mainly in less economically privileged areas of the world, where speakers of small languages are focused on day-to-day living, or are pulled by economic pressures into urban areas for jobs to survive. And in some instances, active language revitalization may be politically dangerous, and so bringing awareness on the issues can be harmful as well.

¹<https://festival.si.edu/2013/one-world-many-voices/smithsonian>, and many of the past Smithsonian Folklife Festival programs emphasize language and central to heritage transmission and include language teachers and lessons.

²<https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/visit/exhibitions/our-living-languages-first-peoples-voices-bc>

³<https://museumsvictoria.com.au/website/bunjilaka/visiting/first-peoples/>

⁴<http://www.languagemuseum.ca/language-museum-map>

⁵<http://www.lastwhispers.org/>

⁶<https://www.planetwordmuseum.org/>

Yet, when awareness comes, most communities jump swiftly from awareness to mobilization. The desire to act very quickly generally outpaces organization, funding, and training. The mid-1990's and early 21st century saw a dramatic shift from how to get youth motivated to being able to providing enough teachers and resources to keep up with youth demand. Youth are the driving force and often the practitioners of language reclamation efforts today. In many parts of the world, young adults and youth have grown up knowing about language loss and revitalization. This awareness is part of their everyday consciousness growing up, and we have yet to know how fully this will play out in the next decades of reversing language shift.

One of the first community responses was to get training in language documentation, description, language teaching methodologies, and literature development. Semi-formal and informal training institutes in linguistics and revitalization approaches and methodologies (see Fitzgerald in this volume), with more and more higher degree programs available in language revitalization and in Indigenous languages. Early trainees helped spread the word in their own communities, and in addition to creating language practitioners, an active network of Indigenous language advocates sprang up. *Language advocacy* is a recognized need and role in many endangered language communities. Today, the Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity in Australia and Collaborative Language Research Institute in North America have regular workshops in language advocacy. These workshops instruct not just how to convey the message and efforts within communities, but how to actively engage the wider public for support, funding, and policy. These are skills not yet taught in linguistics or anthropology departments, or cross-listed with other departments as acceptable core credit for linguistics degrees.

Not enough credit is given to Indigenous language speakers in early public awareness of language endangerment. While community-wide awareness in endangered language communities may have come in part via outside linguists or linguist-driven media coverage, the linguists' knowledge came from concerned community members with whom they worked. Linguists since Boas's time have been aware of language shift, but it was not until the cultural re-awakenings of the late 1960's (coupled in the US with opening of the bilingual education and in Europe with political shifts in the 1970s and 80s) that speakers and consequently their linguists began taking serious action against language shift. So, in endangered language communities, awareness has come from within through speakers and speaker communities, who were also often the first community linguists, the early trainees at language institutes, and from outside through linguists and their efforts to publicize widely. More crucially, awareness (and effective approaches) in endangered language communities comes laterally across the many historical and modern connections that bind Indigenous and autochthonous people together locally and globally.

3. The message itself The general public must be made aware of the causes and scope of language shift: an overall picture of linguistic diversity and the overwhelming and systematic loss of small and minoritized languages to majority languages and dominating political, economic, and social structures. We have done a fairly good job of this in a relatively short period of time. The largest surge of public awareness came in 1990-2010. In 1991, the Linguistic Society of America organized a symposium on language endangerment, leading to 1992 publication in *Language* of Hale et al., including Krauss's clarion call mentioned above. In 1992, the 15th International Congress of Linguists meeting in Quebec raised awareness of language shift and loss to the international linguistics community, and their statement of urgency directly influenced the UNESCO

General Assembly to create the more outwardly focused *Red Book on Endangered Languages* (1993). The *Red Book* went online in 2009 and is now the digital *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*.⁷ These decades produced supportive language policy (always an opportunity for public engagement), non-profit agencies (with dedicated public awareness missions), funding agencies (also good opportunities for press releases), several popular press books,⁸ and Indigenous language institutes and conferences. Most of these are still impactful today and are legacy to many of our current efforts.

Crystal (2011) points out that it has taken the biological world much longer to educate the world about environmental loss and endangered species. For example, between 2007-2013 National Geographic's Enduring Voices Project, with Gregory Anderson, K. David Harrison, and Chris Rainer (photographer), exponentially elevated language endangerment as a global issue, a little over 10 years from Himmelmann. The Audubon Society, on the other hand, has been working for over 100 years to make us aware of the decline in bird species and populations. The upcoming UNESCO Year of Indigenous Language 2019 is a good opportunity for a next large push in public awareness.

There is an intricate balance between raising awareness and producing negativity, blame, and guilt for language communities. While we refuse the rhetoric of *dead* or *extinct* languages to *sleeping* or languages when there are communities who are renewing languages with no current first language fluent speakers, we need to communicate the scope of the crises. And while we refuse the rhetoric that a culture will cease to be when the last speaker dies, we need to communicate the impact of language shift on the community.⁹ If we must pull the public in (the scare), then we must keep them going with the dream, and the hope through the reawakening and language renaissances taking place in and across Indigenous communities. Indigenous and minoritized groups have this: Most can and do envision their community with their languages maintained, or renewed, and this entails for them a healthier, more educated (in their own definitions of educated) citizens. Indeed, language revitalization is a movement in which communities (re)define their groupness and frame other social and political rights (Costa 2017). We cannot just produce fear or guilt on the part of the general public as well. Our task is to build a positive vision for a linguistically diverse future that positively impacts speakers of majority languages.

The media is in continual shock mode, creating an emotional overload to the point that people cannot or do not react. Climate change and its induced natural disasters, poverty and inequalities in justice and education, health crises in Alzheimer's Disease, diabetes, substance abuse and suicide, and nationalistic and imperialistic behavior that spawns continual localized wars and threatens new global wars. A crisis in language just becomes part of the noise. We cannot compete with these if we continue to see language as separate from these other issues. We must admit that most people do not get into language by itself; it is too esoteric, too hard, too remote. Without a positive vision, the general public will continue to be unmoved, or feel helpless at best, in seeing traditional or minoritized cultures relent to urbanization and globalization.

All these major world problems are interrelated and have the same causes as those which create language shift. I firmly believe that recreating and sustaining healthy language communities is part of the solution for all of them. Language renewal is

⁷<http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>

⁸See Hagège 2000, Romaine & Nettle 2001, Crystal 2001, Abley 2003, and Harrison 2007.

⁹For fuller discussions on the rhetoric of language revitalization and its impact, see Hill (2002) and the responses, Perley (2012), Heller & Duchêne (2017), and De Korne & Leonard (2017), among others.

inextricably related inequalities and poverty, to health and suicide rates, and to education. In renewing healthy language communities, we are creating combating prejudices and inequalities, we are creating healthier living, eating, and communities, and we are taking back control of the education of our youth.¹⁰ These problems are so overwhelming and out of people's daily control that language renewal suddenly seems like a part of the solution that people can grasp.

We give them a succinct role, just like the environmental movement has provided consciousness in campaigns like "Reduce, Recycle, Reuse" that promote recycling, taking shorter showers, replacing older light bulbs, planting green spaces and so on. People can understand their individual role in a global problem. Not everyone participates, but enough do that it makes a difference. And importantly, the environmental movement has mobilized younger generations. In the US today, the dividing lines between the two political parties are further apart than most times in our history. However, the youth cross party lines today to support environmental initiatives and confront global warming.

What is the role of the general public in endangered languages? In an increasingly less empathetic world, it is a beginning just to listen to the communities. Be supportive local languages in the schools, and all community revitalization and reclamation endeavors. In monolingual societies, work towards bilingual adults, if not a multilingual society by supporting even majority second language acquisition in primary schools. Easier than arguing for tolerance, we can argue brain health and better pay scales for this, and by raising bilingual adults, there will be much less fear of smaller languages and of others.¹¹ Citing Crystal, "This is not such a great effort as it may appear, compared with the efforts that go into much more dubious enterprises. And let us not forget that the costs of war are always greater than those of peace."¹²

4. A new hope for systemic change We are in a new era of participatory culture through the internet and social media, with consequences for public awareness and acceptance of linguistic diversity. The efforts may seem more diffuse than in the 1990s. However, through video streaming, podcasts, Tedx Talks, blogs and vlogs, and memes (to name a few), we have the capacity to move the message more quickly and to involve more people. In particular, the internet combines the message with the arts, and the arts have the power to move people, to make them feel empathy with the subject. The power of the internet in the diffusion of Indigenous hip hop, rap, and slam poetry as a vehicle for youth expression inspiring youth all over the globe cannot be underestimated.

Film and video are probably the strongest artistic medium to inform and motivate to action the largest number of people. Because of film's popularity throughout the world, it is increasingly cheaper to produce high quality film and it is increasingly easier to distribute widely through the internet. Smart phones and cheaper hand-held cameras are providing a hitherto unknown level of Indigenous youth voices in film. A few documentaries have tackled the subject of language shift, culture, identity,

¹⁰For evidence of health and educational benefits in language reclamation, see Whalen et al. (2016), Child Language Research and Revitalization Working Group (2017), Taff et al. (2017), and Fitzgerald (2017), among others.

¹¹An effective example of the social media messaging can be found in the America Versus video series on Facebook. the May 14 installment entitled America Vs Language effectively presents these arguments by comparing monolingual America with other countries.

¹²In his keynote address to the Barcelona Congress in May 2004, David Crystal gave ten specific measures for mobilizing society as a whole (cited in Mari 2008: 91). I encourage everyone to read them in full. Many of his proposals are underway.

documentation and revitalization efforts worldwide.¹³ Other documentaries portraits of specific language communities, their histories and issues of historical trauma and healing connected to language loss and revitalization.¹⁴ Exceeding both of these genres is Indigenous film. Many go straight to downloading via the internet, but more and more they are screened at internationally recognized film festivals and at least 87 Indigenous film festivals worldwide (Cordova 2015). Festivals and accompanying video releases give an Indigenous voice to public discussion around the issues surrounding cultural loss, trauma and renewal, and approaches for sustainability.¹⁵ The interconnectedness and the beauty of these stories, along with the languages, seeps into the consciousness of generations, as does comfortableness with 'the other.' Films move us to care about the people, the places, the cultures.

Working towards long-term, systemic change in public attitudes, the best place to start is with the youth. We need to have our message reach young people while they are forming their views of the world around them. A few linguists actively engage with local schools to teach about language endangerment, but more of us need to connect with teachers and youth in this way, even if it is one guest lecture to a class or school club. Some organizations have teaching materials or information for teachers on their websites.¹⁶ To be broadly impactful, our field needs to develop many resources for teachers to use or able to be modified for a variety of class types (formal and informal settings) for a full range of learning levels.

I have hope in change through youth. I recently looked through a yearbook from a high school in Wichita, Kansas, the rural, conservative, monolingual heartland of the US. This was the same high school that I graduated from nearly forty years ago. When I was there, I know we had students who spoke Spanish at home, and we had the first speakers of Southeast Asian languages coming into the school attending mainly ESL classes, but I never heard a language other than English spoken outside of a foreign language class. The 2018 student-run yearbook contains 13 testimonies about what the high school means to them. These testimonials are in 13 languages other than English, and then translated into English.¹⁷ The testimonials frame the yearbook, with half at the beginning and half at the end. They are a clear celebration of their diversity, and an unstated, natural endorsement of a multilingual world.

¹³See films such as *The Linguists* (Kramer, Miller & Newberger 2008) and *Language Matters with Bob Holman* (Grubin 2014).

¹⁴*We Still Live Here – Às Nutayuneân* (Makepeace 2011), and *Keep Talking* (Weinberg 2017) are two excellent examples of this genre.

¹⁵The Smithsonian Mother Tongue Film Festival (MTFF) in Washington, DC, begins every year on UNESCO International Mother Language Day on February 21. While focusing on Indigenous film, MTFF is dedicated to films in endangered and minoritized languages or films about language endangerment and renewal.

¹⁶The Stolen Generation, an educational website sponsored by the Australian government, has in-depth teaching resources, including curriculum and sequences learning modules. Terralingua has a biocultural education initiative (<http://terralingua.org/our-work/bcd-education/>) The 2015 interactive map Native Land that allows people to overlay current Indigenous language boundaries with historical treaties and traditional lands of former British colonies the site includes information for teachers (<https://native-land.ca/>). The Endangered Language Project has recently hired staff to create learning modules for teachers to better use the site and to incorporate lessons on endangered languages into their curriculum (<http://www.endangeredlanguages.com>).

¹⁷In their words, these languages are Vietnamese, Spanish, Kinyarwanda, Bengali, Uganda, Algerian French, Congo Swahili, Swahili, Cambodian, Bangla, Arabic, Turkish.


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