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REVIEW ARTICLE

Colonization, globalization and the plight of 'weak' languages[1]

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Daniel Nettle & Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing voices: the extinction of the world's languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. x+241.

1. Preliminaries

The title of this article is in part intended to capture the essence of Nettle & Romaine's very informative book about the ongoing or anticipated extinction of several languages around the world. It reflects two factors central to the authors' arguments: colonization and globalization as causes of language endangerment and death. I recast the general scenario in terms of language contact marked by a competition for prevalence. According to the authors, this state of affairs has typically, though not always, favored the socio-economically powerful at the expense of the powerless. The present title also avoids the melodrama that pervades Nettle & Romaine's otherwise impressive documentation of facts, which sometimes sounds like a political manifesto.[2] I show below that this rhetoric, which is also evident in much of the related literature in linguistics, from Krauss (1992) to Crystal (2000) and Hagège (2000) and Maffi (2001), has typically not shed adequate light either on why the imminence of language extinction has not really been the same from one part of the world to another, or on what it really takes to keep a language alive.

I cannot follow the tradition of shorter reviews, which start with comprehensive summaries of the contents of books and then use some space

[1] I am grateful to my Winter 2001 *Ecology of Language Evolution* class for motivating me to articulate more clearly some of the issues I raise below. I also thank Michel DeGraff, Sylvain Neuvel, Alison Irvine, Umberto Ansaldo, and an anonymous JL referee for feedback on the draft of this article.

[2] The subtitle is complemented with the following from the cover blurb: 'The world's languages are dying. Ninety percent of them are expected to disappear in the next one hundred years. Why are they dying and what should we do about it?' I argue below that it is debatable whether N&R's answers to these questions are satisfactory. Nonetheless, their documentation style should reach the heart of whoever is concerned with the fate of indigenous languages especially in former European colonies.

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to comment generally on the authors' main positions. Doing so in this review article would force me to unnecessarily repeat parts of the summary several times just to enable the reader to remember what particular part of the book I am responding to. Instead, I submit partial thematic reflections organized around individual chapters. These discussions start with the relevant summaries.

Generally, *Vanishing voices* is an important party-line treatise in which, consistent with the mainstream reaction of linguists to language endangerment since Krauss (1992), Nettle & Romaine (henceforth N&R) do an impeccable job of documenting various cases of language endangerment around the world, especially in the New World, in the former Soviet Union, and in Australia. Their facts make it impossible not to associate the rapid decrease of number of languages over the past few centuries with European colonization of the world and Western economic expansion. Unfortunately, the authors do not distinguish between different colonization styles, viz., settlement, exploitation, and trade colonization. As I show below, these do not bear equally on language vitality.[3]

I also dissent in some other important respects from the party line of *Vanishing voices*, though I hail its publication. In the conventional spirit of a review article, I take this opportunity to write a rejoinder that expresses, hopefully, an equally informed position from the perspective of individuals who have experienced precisely some of the situations discussed in the book, if only to say:

> Languages do not kill languages; speakers do, precisely those who are expected to use them rather than those speaking the alternatives to which they shift. In the ongoing competition for survival in changing socio-

[3] I submit this distinction in Mufwene (2001) to account for varying ways in which colonization as a cause of population movement and language contact bears on language evolution. Trade colonization is about the oldest form, which typically led to one of the other colonization styles. It is cautiously based on egalitarian relations (at least on the surface) with the host population. It occurred in Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the 16th and 17th centuries. It enabled Europeans to concurrently develop their settlement colonies in the 17th century, with the explicit intention of building new homelands and better Europes than what they had left behind (Crosby 1986). In the 19th century Europeans started converting their trade colonies of Africa and Asia into exploitation colonies, over which they gained full political and economic control in the interest of the European metropoles. Colonizers, rather than colonists, came to serve their governments or companies on specific terms, after which they were relocated to other colonies or were rewarded with more prestigious positions in the metropole, where they were expected to retire, though some chose to remain in the colonies. Overall and with some oversimplification, Europeans imposed their languages as vernaculars only in settlement colonies. Elsewhere they used them only as lingua francas primarily for communication with indigenous colonial auxiliaries and other elite. They usually adopted local lingua francas such as Swahili, Hindi, and Baba Malay for communication with the rest of the population, which was often mediated through the indigenous elite. Thus, the impact of colonization on the vitality of indigenous languages has varied not only according to colonizing nations but also from one colonization style to another. I return to this below.

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economic ecologies, a better understanding of such speakers' decisions, motivations, and the dilemmas they face would help. Language endangerment is a more wicked problem than has been acknowledged in the literature. It sometimes boils down to a choice between saving speakers from their economic predicament and saving a language. Seldom can both goals be congruent unless the ecologies are made more advantageous to the relevant populations.

Because this reaction of mine may be confused with what is identified in *Vanishing voices* as the 'benign neglect' position (see below), I should provide some background. I was born and raised in the now Democratic Republic of Congo, one of those Third World territories where there is the most linguistic diversity feared to disappear. I feel it is high time linguists brought the interests of speakers of the relevant languages to the center of the debate and considered their adaptive responses to changing socio-economic ecologies in terms of costs and benefits to them.[4] Language shift must be treated as one of the speakers' survival strategies in this context.

Most discussions of language endangerment have reflected views of languages and cultures as ideally pure and static systems whose integrity and survival must be protected. They suggest that speakers will lose much of their identities if their languages and cultures either change or are replaced. However, we must also ask ourselves whether the new identities of the populations who have shifted from their languages are necessarily less adaptive for them or if the cultures they have adopted have not been influenced by the substrate cultures and have therefore not changed into new ones. For instance, to what extent is Jamaican culture European or non-African? To what extent is Jamaican Patois purely a Germanic language? After all, there are no languages or cultures that are the same as they were centuries, or just a shorter time, ago.[5]

[4] My present life in the Western world itself exemplifies one of the perhaps unsuspected aspects of language shift as an adaptive response to changing ecologies. Without trivializing the problem in the same way that the Francophone association of States is worried about the increasing expansion of English as a world lingua franca (a concern about imperial monopoly!), exoduses of bilinguals in European languages to economically more prosperous countries where they are likely to 'succeed' without having to speak their mother tongues is an incentive (direct or indirect) for those left behind to work harder at commanding foreign languages more fluently than their own. But the story is more complex, as usual, and we need not get into it here.

[5] These examples, which may surprise most of those who have published about language loss, are particularly appropriate, because Jamaica is one of those former plantation settlement colonies where the indigenous populations, the Caribs, were driven out or exterminated, taking their languages with them to their graves. It is also a place where none of the numerous African languages spoken by the slaves survived as a vernacular. English prevailed of course, but, as is obvious from the debate on whether or not Jamaican Patois is an English dialect, the European language won only a pyrrhic victory. More or less the same picture emerges if one re-examines, for instance, the dispersal and diversification of Indo-European from the perspective of population movements (hence of colonization) and language contacts, as suggested by Martinet (1986) and Renfrew (1988).

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If language endangerment is an anomaly caused by colonization and globalization, wouldn't it make more sense to gain a better understanding of the process by addressing the following questions among others? How have these forces worked to reduce linguistic diversity? Can their negative consequences be halted or reversed? If they can, how? Have the victims' responses to these forces been (mal)adaptive? What can be changed without further victimizing the affected populations? Could endangered languages be maintained without changing the very ecologies that have affected their vitality? How does the vitality of speakers figure in the whole endeavor? These questions underlie my discussion below.

2. Language endangerment as a wicked problem

N&R start *Vanishing voices* with the question 'why and how are languages dying?' (a section of Chapter One: 'Where have all the languages gone', 1–25). They also make the following observations, among many others that space limitations prevent me from quoting here:

> [P]eople do not fling away their languages for no good reason. … language shift and death occur under duress and stressful social circumstances, where there is no realistic choice but to give in. Many people stop speaking their languages out of self-defense as a survival strategy … [as] in El Salvador in 1932, when after a peasant uprising anyone identified as Indian either by dress or physical appearance was rounded up and killed by Salvadoran soldiers (6).
>
> Language shift and death occur as a response to pressures of various types – social, cultural, economic, and even military – on a community (7).
>
> The language of the global village (or McWorld, as some have called it) is English: not to use it is to risk ostracization from the benefits of the global economy (31).

The authors do not really answer the question why and how languages are dying until Chapters Four and Six. In the former, they indicate that a language may die if its speakers are exterminated – such as by war or by an epidemic – and in the latter, they state more straightforwardly that language shift is a common cause of language death. Let me add that the kind of population contact that is more likely to bring about language loss is an integrative one, in which the competition between cultures is not so overt and speakers who are shifting to another vernacular realize what they have done to their ancestral language and culture only after these are moribund or dead. One can thus also speak of language loss following from the dispersal of members of an ethnolinguistic community to a new location, where they are absorbed by the local population and cannot continue to communicate (on a regular basis) either with each other or with members left behind in the old community. This is indeed the condition in which many immigrant

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communities lose their heritage languages, as has been experienced by many non-Anglophone European immigrants in the United States. It is also the condition that has threatened Gullah, the creole of the American states of Georgia and South Carolina, the most. This happened especially when many of its speakers migrated from their homeland on the coast to live in New York and other northern cities after World War II.

N&R do well in paying attention to these interactive aspects of language attrition and loss, showing – though not quite to my satisfaction – that the fates of languages as parasitic species (Mufwene 2001) depend on the experiences and/or acts of their speakers. They are joined in this by Hagège (2000), who provides a long chapter (271–341) on the discontinuous history of Hebrew, one punctuated by periods of relocation and dispersal of the Jews since the deportation of the Israelites to Babylonia in the sixth century BC.

In Chapter One, N&R focus mostly on political and emotional reasons for language loss. For instance, they argue that a language may die if it is stigmatized. I doubt that this reason is sufficient. African-American English and creoles around the world seem to have done quite well despite the strong stigma associated with them. So have Appalachian English and Cockney, among a host of other nonstandard varieties. Dispersal of their speakers outside, and changes in, the ecologies of their regular usage (factors dealt with in Chapter Four) seem to account more for, for example, the ongoing disappearance of Yiddish than the stigma associated with it in especially 19th-century Germany. Such languages seem to teach us just what has received the least attention about language vitality as a concomitant of language endangerment, viz., the fact that language loyalty and ethnolinguistic identity can make some stigmatized languages or dialects quite resilient. On the other hand, socio-economic integration (despite all its social benefits) disfavors linguistic and cultural diversity.

N&R also ask: 'where and when are languages at risk?' (7). According to them, this happens 'when they are no longer transmitted naturally to children in the home by parents or other caretakers' (8).[6] They then proceed, on pages 8–9, to dramatize the situation with the following statistics:

- '90 percent of the world's population speaks the 100 most-used languages',
- 'there are at least 6000 languages spoken by about 10 percent of the people on earth',

[6] There are several cases in which viable language varieties (which have indeed counteracted the trend of language loss) have been transmitted from non-native speakers to non-native speakers. This is true of pidginized and indigenized varieties of European colonial languages. It is also true of some classical languages, such as Ancient Greek and Classical Latin (the latter of which functioned as a trade and scholarly lingua franca in Europe up to the early stages of the Modern Age and continues to function as the lingua franca of the Vatican). The received doctrine that a language is normally transmitted from adults to children needs re-examining (Mufwene 2001), independent of the accuracy of the notions 'transmission' and 'acquisition', which I will not discuss here.

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- 'there may be only as few as 600 'safe' languages',
- 'the vast majority of the world's languages may be in danger of extinction',
- '80 percent (149 out of 187) of native Indian languages [in the United States] are no longer being learned by children',
- only 4 of 60 Native American languages in Canada 'are truly viable',
- 'only five of the native languages of what is now the US have as many as 10,000 to 20,000 speakers',
- '17 percent (50 out of 300)' and '27 percent (110 out of 400)' of, respectively, Central and South American indigenous languages 'are no longer viable' (the reason for this state of affairs lies partly in the decimation of their speakers), and
- '90 percent of [the] estimated 250 Aboriginal languages [of Australia are] near extinction'.

Then they observe:

> Africa and Asia are the continents with the highest number of living indigenous languages, although European languages have spread over both regions during the last 200 years. … virtually all of African nations were affected to some degree. … 54 languages [are] already extinct, and another 116 [are] in the process of extinction (9).

The facts are definitely informative and likely to work especially on the Western reader's emotions, because the regretted state of affairs is obviously correlated with the European dispersal around the world over the past four centuries. Nothing much is said about the fact that colonization and globalization have recurred in different forms since the dawn of the history of mankind, at least not until Chapter Five. Nothing is said about the fact that only 3 percent of the world's languages are spoken in Europe, one of the most densely populated parts of the world, and Third World countries have often been encouraged, or tempted, to emulate its development model. I think that while the authors sound a loud alarm about the negative effects of colonization and globalization on the vitality or the lives of some languages, it would be of help to be equally articulate about the viable alternatives that the affected populations really have.

N&R do not say anything about the fact that in Africa and Asia, where language endangerment is less severe, Europeans developed EXPLOITATION colonies, in contrast with their SETTLEMENT colonies in the Americas and Australia, where indigenous languages are the most endangered. An important difference is that, with very few exceptions, European languages do not function as vernaculars among the overwhelming majorities of indigenous Africans and Asians, even in places like Singapore, where, for the sake of political unity, its multiethnic and multilingual population is encouraged by the political leadership to embrace English as a vernacular.

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Instead, it is lingua franca varieties of indigenous languages, such as Bahasa Malay (in Indonesia), Wolof (in Senegal), Hausa (in Nigeria), and Swahili (in East Africa), and new languages such as Kituba and Lingala (in the Democratic Republic of Congo), which have stymied the vitality of many ethnic languages, although the general cause for this phenomenon remains European colonization. Still, the situation is not the same the world over.

The over-reliance on the numerical strength of speakers to gauge the health of languages is also misleading because isolated small communities that remain unaffected by global socio-economic structures have not been affected by the forces that are driving some languages to extinction. Studies in Brenzinger (1998) report this about several pastoral and hunter-gathering communities in East and southern Africa, whose languages have been protected by little other than isolation from the dominant groups. The few Khoisan languages remaining to date in southern Africa would have been extinct already if isolation by desert and arid conditions had not halted the spread of Bantu languages among them. Overall, given the way several Third World countries continue to regress economically, genocides are better predictors of language endangerment than globalized economy in their case. The marginalization of masses of the population from the global economy in places like Jamaica has given Creole, a marker of class identity and the medium in which their voices of protest are carried (through Reggae music especially), greater vitality than falsely implied by DeCamp's (1971) decreolization hypothesis. I mention all this to emphasize that we should develop differentiated knowledge of the ecologies of language vitality and endangerment before we dramatize the situation in the way N&R and most other authors on this subject matter do.

Among the greatest points of interest in *Vanishing voices* is the reason that N&R give for revitalizing or preserving endangered languages, to which most of Chapter Three, 'Lost words/lost worlds' (50–77), is devoted.[7] The authors focus on the role that the vocabulary of a language especially plays as a window into the universe of knowledge of its speakers. As they observe clearly, from a relativistic point of view, there is no particular language or culture that names everything or has the best way of cataloging knowledge of the world (59). There may, in fact, be physical ecological factors that bear on, or explain, peculiarities of the world views expressed in various languages.[8] On the other hand, claims such as the following probably

[7] Chapter Two, 'A world of diversity' (26–49), continues the theme of Chapter One, also giving a more elaborate account of linguistic diversity around the world. It correlates it with biological diversity, to which I return below. Space limitations prevent an extensive discussion of the chapter here.

[8] I am not sure how far one would go in attempting to account for relativistic Whorfianism by physical-ecological determinism. For instance, could there be such an explanation for why some populations speak languages with more elaborate systems of numeral classifiers than do other people?

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extrapolate the relativistic Whorfianism beyond its limits. N&R suggest that during World War II the crew of an American fighter plane that crashed in northern Australia would probably not have starved to death if they had known an Aboriginal language, because this would have helped them identify which local plants are edible (70). They do not say whether the one crew member who survived this ordeal owes his survival to such knowledge (which he would have refused to share with his mates?), to better physical endurance, or to luck. An important question in this case is whether knowledge stored in a language is necessarily evident to all its speakers. For instance, do all speakers of Djirbal know all the distinctions that its vocabulary stores about the local fauna and flora?

N&R also argue that 'written languages survive their speakers in texts, and can in some cases be restored' (51). It is tempting to invoke Israeli Hebrew in this connection, but it is debatable whether it is really a case of language resurrection. This of course suggests a useful distinction between two kinds of 'dead languages': those gone without a trace of their existence, because they were not written, versus those that are dead only because they have no more speakers who have the liberty of innovating novel forms or structures during their communicative acts. Theoreticians may want to reconcile this distinction with their definition of 'language', which certainly cannot amount to the set of utterances (or written or signed counterparts thereof), because those are not the systems that produced them. In a related vein, Latin is generally considered dead apparently because it has no more native speakers. Thus the fact that it functions as the lingua franca of the Vatican does not seem to matter. That leaves us with the following question: what kind of usage by non-native speakers makes pidgins living languages but not Latin at the Vatican? If Latin is dead, it certainly is not in the same way as Hittite is.

On page 52, N&R explain that Laura Fish Somersal maintained her knowledge of the Native American language Wappo (California) much longer, after there were no other speakers of it, because she did not attend school. To be sure, the authors do not advocate illiteracy as a means of keeping languages alive in illiterate communities. Rather, this case illustrates that any of the many forms of isolation qua absence of contact with the language of a colonizing population can help maintain a language. Ironically, it also shows that in efforts to prevent language loss the role of literacy (especially the ability to write and therefore 'freeze' discourse) is more to preserve rather than to revitalize a language. Literacy did not prevent Hittite, Gaelic, Ancient Greek, and the like from dying or becoming moribund.

Chapter Four, 'The ecology of language' (78–98), is very interesting because it elaborates on the correlation N&R established in Chapter Two (after Nettle 1999) between rich linguistic diversity and rich biological diversity in a belt around the world that stretches between the tropics, and especially in the rain forest. (They provide maps on pages 33 and 44, Chapter

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Two.) The regions are also sparsely populated and include New Guinea, where over 1,000 languages are spoken (80). They observe that 'the overall ratio of languages to people is … only about 1 to 5,000 … 80 percent of the languages have fewer than 5,000 speakers, and as many as one-third have fewer than 500' (81).

One would suspect isolation among such populations to have helped maintain the languages. However, N&R correctly note that New Guinea ethnic groups formed alliances to protect each other against common enemies (85). Such egalitarian, non-assimilationist contacts seem to have helped the population maintain languages, thus indirectly highlighting the catastrophic effect of colonization (as domination of one population by another) on linguistic diversity. However, this observation sheds only partial light on the process. Differences in colonization styles still matter. One of the differences between New Guinea and Australia, where there are very few Aboriginal languages left, lies in the fact that the former underwent exploitation colonization but the latter settlement colonization. Exploitation colonies of Africa and Asia seem to have preserved their languages better than Australia and former settlement colonies of the Americas (Mufwene 2001).

It should also be useful to distinguish between different kinds of settlement colonization styles, for instance, according to whether or not indigenous languages were used to dominate the local populations (as in the case of the Portuguese and the Spaniards in South America using Tupi and Quechua), how fast colonization penetrated the deepest parts of the colonies (rather slowly in Brazil), and how socio-economic integration proceeded (faster for many indigenous populations in North America than in South America). A better understanding of the role of such factors should help explain why a higher proportion of Native American languages have survived in former Iberian colonies than in former French and English settlement colonies. Unfortunately, N&R (like most of the literature on language endangerment) pay almost no attention to such factors.

In this chapter, the authors also continue their discussion of reasons for language death, touched upon in Chapter One. They invoke the role of economy and politics (90f.) but they hardly elaborate on how these factors bring about language loss. Experts on the subject matter will infer more from the typology presented in the last third of the chapter than will the non-initiate. Here too arises the question of what economic alternatives linguists who argue for the maintenance or preservation of endangered languages have to offer to their speakers. Can languages be maintained without changing the new socio-economic ecologies which brought about their demise? Does maintaining endangered languages without changing the socio-economic ecologies not entail the material damnation of the relevant populations that have already been affected by the current economic systems? In the final analysis, isn't language maintenance for the sake of 'biolinguistic diversity'

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tantamount to declaring languages as more important to linguists than the speakers themselves?

Given the realities of the present-day interconnected global economy with all the aspirations it has aroused almost world-wide, how can languages be maintained without killing their speakers' aspirations? Under what natural conditions can bi- or multilingualism be sustained? Can lessons be learned from places such as Taiwan and Malaysia, where participation in the global economy has presented no threat to Chinese and Malay, respectively? Do Third World countries have the option of embracing the global economy in their indigenous languages and how should they proceed? Or do linguists think the solution to the wicked problem of language endangerment lies in giving up globalization? Can cultural diversity (not) be maintained without traditional linguistic diversity?

By the way, European languages have admittedly indigenized in former exploitation colonies such as Senegal, Nigeria, and India. The divergence of the non-European varieties has been acknowledged with labels such as FRANÇAIS AFRICAINS, and NIGERIAN and INDIAN ENGLISHES, which all suggest increase in structural and cultural diversity. From the point of view of restructuring under particular contact conditions, the current indigenization processes are in fact reminiscent of, for instance, the speciation of Latin into Romance languages under and after the Roman colonization of Western Europe, where Celtic languages were the vernaculars. An important difference here lies actually in the fact that the European languages have had little impact on the vitality of the indigenous languages in former exploitation colonies, contrary to the extermination of Celtic languages by the offspring of Latin. Though it is unlikely that any of us today will see the end of the current diversification of European languages (including cases of the development of creoles), research on language vitality and endangerment can be made less biased by presenting balance sheets of births and deaths and showing how things have balanced themselves across time.

Regarding the association of language with culture, several studies in Brenzinger (1998) illustrate language shift without concomitant culture shift in Africa. As a matter of fact, the literature on the development of creole vernaculars and indigenized varieties of European languages as instances of adoption with modification suggests no concurrent adoption of the relevant European cultures. New cultures have typically developed which often reveal more influence from the substrate cultures than the new languages do (see, e.g. Mintz & Price 1992 about former slave societies of the New World). In both cases, one is reminded of speciation in population genetics (Mufwene 2001). I find N&R's case studies useful mostly to the extent that their facts often prompt an engaged reader to come up with alternative interpretations.

Chapter Five, 'The biological wave' (99–125), is where N&R give an apt historical perspective on colonization since the beginning of mankind and its effect on the lives of languages. They note that 'the rapid loss of diversity

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only really occurred in the last thousand years or so. It is a result of the emergence of massive differentials in the power which societies have to affect the environment. These differentials run in favor of Eurasia against the other continents' (100).[9]

To be sure, the increasingly globalizing economy of the past few centuries has dealt a deadly blow to several languages. N&R explain convincingly that changes in economic life styles since the invention of agriculture have enabled populations that are technologically, militarily, and/or economically more powerful to dominate others and impose their languages on them. This is indeed true not only of the colonization of much of western continental Europe by the Romans, or of England by Germanic tribes, or of North Africa, Iberia, and South Asia by the Arabs, or of much of the rest of the world by Western Europe and Russia, but also of the earlier colonization of much of sub-Saharan Africa by the Bantu populations and of the much earlier expansion of Indo-Europeans all over Europe (see also Mufwene 2001). The farther back one goes in time, the more difficult it is to determine the number of languages that have vanished from the world. Nonetheless, population dispersal patterns in the history of mankind suggest that some languages have prevailed at the expense of others, especially where political colonization has left no room for economic egalitarianism, as in Europe.

If N&R are correct that the earlier pre-agriculturalist communities of hunters and gatherers were small and thus presented a lot of linguistic diversity, then we can assume that the Stammbaums representing both family ties and language diversification in genetic linguistics have represented only one facet of a long and complex history of population movements and contacts that has involved several cases of language loss. For instance, as partly noted above, both the Germanic and Romance languages in Europe have prevailed at the expense of Celtic languages. Today's experience of

[9] The generalization to Eurasia is disputable. Contrary to what is suggested by N&R's table of the top fifteen most widely spoken languages (29), Chinese varieties, Bengali, Hindi, Japanese, Javanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Telugu do not (all) owe the large numbers of their speakers to the same kinds of colonial ventures that spread English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic around the world. Except in the ancient past, which is reminiscent of the development of the Romance languages, none of these Asian languages has spread outside its ancestral setting to become the vernacular of larger populations than in the original metropole, at least not in the way that Arabic and the European languages have. To be sure, some Indic languages and Chinese varieties have been exported to other territories but not so much by the colonization efforts of their speakers as by the actions of the same European colonizers through indentured labor. (The Chinese traders who preceded the Europeans in Southeast Asia shifted to Malay or other local languages.) Moreover, the expatriate communities that speak these Asian languages have remained smaller than in their homelands and they have generally not been successful in acquiring (large numbers of) second-language speakers. Numbers due to large genetically homogeneous population sizes are different from those due to colonial expansion and assimilation. It is the latter process that has contributed more to the loss of linguistic diversity on which N&R focus.

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decrease in the number of languages seems to be the continuation of an older trend, although the colonization has become less and less political and more and more economic (especially since the independence of African countries in the 1960s). By focusing more on the decrease in the number of languages than on the concurrent diversification of the expanding languages, we have addressed only part of a complex process of language co-evolution. It is certainly true that more languages are dying than there are new varieties emerging. However, the claim among many linguists that our world is evolving toward linguistic homogeneity is about as disputable as a similar claim until recently that African-American English was disappearing in favor of White American (standard) English. It is mostly this implication of N&R's otherwise well documented discussion that I disagree with. The demographic facts are nonetheless impressive in this chapter too.

Chapter Six, 'The economic wave' (126–149), essentially continues some of the discussions in Chapter Five. It highlights the role of economy in the expansion of some languages, e.g. English in the present-day United Kingdom and Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea. The scale of expansion is of course correlated with whether a language is used in all sectors of its economic system or restricted only to some. Also, economic inequalities among populations have forced many of their vernaculars to the condition of 'peripherality' (129). Here the reader will find a long section on the demise of Celtic languages in the United Kingdom since the development of Old English (133–143). This situation is compared to those of a few languages in recent European colonies, as the authors highlight the role of language shift in language death. Unfortunately, the chapter ends in a political rhetoric that sheds little light on the process of language loss, especially in Third World countries. Also, it does not articulate any alternative economic ecology that may prevent language loss. The following question becomes compelling: in what ways can speakers of indigenous languages both embrace the new languages in which they must now evolve economically and safely keep them from encroaching on domains formerly reserved to their ancestral vernaculars? Is this possible while socio-economic equality and integration of populations are being advocated, and how?

In Chapter Seven, 'Why something should be done' (150–175), N&R address the 'benign neglect position'. As they formulate it, it amounts to the following: 'there have always been massive extinctions, so why should we be concerned about the prospect of another?' (153). Speakers of endangered languages 'quite reasonably have more pressing concerns, such as improving their economic prospects' than worrying about the fates of their languages (153).[10] They argue that 'the very policies which best support their languages

[10] The reader should know that this position is different from what has underlain the present essay, viz., although some languages have superseded others throughout the history of mankind, they only won pyrrhic victories. The contacts with the languages they have replaced have transformed them into new ones, with each wave of contacts producing more

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are likely to be the ones which will offer [the relevant populations] such a route' (154). They dispute the position that language loss is a consequence of CHOICES made by the relevant populations in a 'free, competitive market'. According to N&R, this attitude is definitely wrong.

It is true that in many, and perhaps in most, cases there is no choice but to shift to the socio-economically more powerful language. The choices are often between, on the one hand, not surviving politically and/or economically and, on the other, 'going with the flow', so to speak. But from the point of view of changing ecology, either members of a species adapt (in order to survive) or they do not. One can argue that maintaining ancestral languages without changing the ecologies that led their speakers to give them up is no solution. Such a prescription amounts to making the speakers less competitive or making them work harder to survive in an ecology where others do not have to do the same.

What is perhaps missing from the whole rhetoric are arguments explaining to what extent the speakers themselves are endangered by their adaptations through language shift. In most cases, populations DO value the languages they have given up and they truly regret losing them. Clearly, giving up their languages – which usually is not a deliberate act but rather the cumulative consequence of repeated communicative acts – is a price that various circumstances have forced them to pay. However, have linguists figured out which socio-economic solutions are good for these populations that will help them nurture their languages to survival? Is monolingualism the cause of language loss or a consequence of a socio-economic ecology that led the affected population to speak the alternative language more regularly and thereby kill the ancestral one by a form of atrophy we call ATTRITION? Getting speakers to modify their linguistic behaviors in order to maintain languages makes ecological sense to the extent that speakers as hosts of linguistic species are the immediate ecologies of languages. However, how efficient can the prescriptions be when the speakers themselves are victims of larger ecologies, which are the larger socio-economic ecologies in which they struggle for survival? In this necessarily ecological approach to the problem of endangered languages, shouldn't linguists' prescriptions be extended to the ultimate ecologies that influence speakers' behaviors? More plainly, in what ways can the present global socio-economic ecology be changed in order to sustain linguistic diversity, cultural heterogeneity, and individual multilingualism/multiculturalism? If the present setup remains the same, to what extent can speakers of the disadvantaged languages be encouraged not to give them up and still maintain their aspirations? This is the point where the difference between the desire for a more equitable state of affairs and

new varieties than there were before. This is true of all the European languages that have spread all over the world today. We may not preserve the same diversity, but new forms of diversity continue to emerge.

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articulating the steps that would produce it becomes so obvious. *Vanishing voices*, like the literature on language endangerment in general, does not articulate the steps.

Based on the experience of countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia, where globalization has been implemented in local languages, perhaps it is possible to do so in some other places, but it must be remembered that Japanese, Chinese, and Malay have prevailed in these countries at the expense of other indigenous languages. More or less the same arguments used now against the spread of English can be used against these other languages. It seems well advised to better understand socio-economic systems in which individual multilingualism thrives, to compare them carefully with those where it does not, against models of economic development desired by or for specific populations, before determining whether a uniform solution is possible. In the end, we must ask whether language endangerment is a problem that linguists should address alone and whether educating populations to stick to their ancestral languages is a realistic approach for a behavior that is natural and spontaneous.

N&R are certainly correct in pointing out that under present economic conditions, 'the rich have got much richer and the poor have also become poorer' (156). Allusion is made here especially to Third World countries, the poorer of which are those that have emerged from exploitation, rather than settlement, colonization. However, these are also places where language loss has been the least catastrophic, where the vast majority of the citizens do not speak European languages, and yet where the scandalously more affluent of the people have embraced European languages and economic models (in which monopoly is the trend) to selfishly rule and exploit their own people. If linguists are really concerned with helping the local populations, the latter's problem is not primarily linguistic, it is economic and political. Language maintenance is generally not a (serious) problem in many such polities, at least not to the extent observable in former settlement colonies such as Australia and North America.

The problem is really of a different order in former settlement colonies, where European languages have replaced or are replacing indigenous languages as vernaculars. Lucrative businesses are run in European languages and favor those who speak them over those who do not. Where society is (being) integrated and integration is associated with better living conditions (by the standards of today's material world), one cannot so easily expect the affected indigenous populations to give up the current scale of values just to protect their ancestral heritage. I too think that the present global economic system is not benefiting everybody, that we should stop deforestation, that there should be more equitable distribution of mining revenues, that in several countries educational policies (controlled as they are by the economic systems in place) have disfavored less powerful languages, etc. Still, I find it hard to believe that doing no more than training speakers to hold on to their

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ancestral language and produce literature in it will empower them economically and politically and will do them as much good as their languages will to linguistics. In the first place, how does one get them to hold on to their languages when, in order to improve their economic conditions, they must relocate for jobs to places where it is more practical to communicate in other languages and their children find no immediate benefit in learning the language of their parents, or in situations where the locals are demographically overwhelmed by newcomers who have jobs and affluence in their language (variety)? How does one motivate them when speaking or knowing one's ancestral language becomes tantamount to preserving a museum or zoo piece?[11]

N&R recommend the following action plan: 'First, human population growth must stabilize. Second, we must raise the living standards of the rural poor in the developing world … . Third, we need to conserve the world's biolinguistic diversity' (165). Unfortunately, they do not say how. They justify their position with the following:

> indigenous systems of knowledge and ecosystem management can be both highly sophisticated and incredibly useful, and this alone is a reason for valuing minority languages and the cultures which are tied to them (170).

There is no question about this. However, is loss of language the main reason why such traditional knowledge and practice are being lost? Isn't the indigenization of European languages evidence that they could actually be adapted to convey the same knowledge if language shift and loss were the main change in their lives? Isn't the focus on languages tantamount to addressing an epiphenomenon rather than the root of the problem itself?

As a matter of fact, N&R show on page 171 that the loss of such knowledge is tied to prohibition in some territories against continuing traditional practices. Thus loss of the knowledge (hence of part of the culture) seems to be as much a consequence of economic policies as language loss is. Restoring languages alone, without changing their economic ecologies, will not do the trick. How do we change this ecology? The authors suggest no explicit solution. In fact this chapter carries to its highest level the manifesto tone of several parts of *Vanishing voices*. It contains more claims of what the ideal state of affairs should be but does not state how the ideal

[11] To be sure, one can revitalize an animal species from a zoo, but one does so by recreating an ecology that is hospitable to the relevant species. For a language, that means creating a socio-economic system that makes its knowledge beneficial to survival. This is a lesson that Israel and Francophone Canada make available to us. Individual multilingualism is benefit-driven, be it for the purposes of interacting with different people, getting more job opportunities, or impressing others with one's linguistic skills. Seldom has it been for the purpose of preserving one's particular culture, except to anthropologists and linguists, and *post-facto* to those who regret the languages they no longer speak.

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can be reached. This shortcoming undermines the light that the book sheds on several aspects of language loss, especially the role of the economic and political ecology.

N&R state at the outset of Chapter Eight, 'Sustainable features' (176–204), that

> [i]nternational, regional, and national policies that empower indigenous peoples and promote sustainable development are the key to preserving local ecosystems essential to language maintenance. The preservation of local ecosystems is, in turn, critical for the preservation of the global ecosystem, which is the intersection of all local ecosystems (176–177).

The position seems confused to me, because globalization has typically disfavored diversity, even in the cases of Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia cited above.

The authors also note that

> much of the linguistic literature on language maintenance has been concerned with preserving the structures of individual languages in grammars and dictionaries, or has directed its attention to education programs in the threatened language or to campaigns for official status (179).

They argue that what is needed to maintain or revitalize endangered languages is to preserve their 'cultures and habitats' (179). All these observations are only part of a complex state of affairs. They invite the same comments as above, regarding the specific actions needed on the economic ecology in order to make it more favorable to the relevant cultures and languages.

They report on efforts to revitalize Hawai'ian through the school system and the media (179–183), explain why Karaja – spoken on a river island in the Amazon – is not dying (yet) (183–185), and hail attempts to reintroduce Passamaquoddy at Plaisant Point (northern Maine) by teaching it in school. Only the future will determine the extent to which such efforts to revitalize or 'reintroduce' languages are fruitful. The most successful cases that I know, the creation and adoption of Modern Hebrew from various sources as the vernacular of Israel and the promotion of French as the vernacular of Quebec, have involved concurrent mobilization of the political and economic machineries. Contrary to what N&R suggest on page 189, ethnic differentiation has not been the primary reason why attempts to revitalize languages elsewhere have failed. Making it possible for speakers to earn their living competitively in these languages has been a rewarding incentive. This does not seem to have been the case in other language revitalization endeavors.

On the other hand, the fact that several languages have survived long enough without support of the global economic system, especially in Third World countries, suggests that speakers actually have much more ethnic

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loyalty and pride in their heritage than the linguistic literature has acknowledged about communities whose languages are more seriously endangered. The evidence also reveals that language endangerment is more endemic in multilingual communities where ethnolinguistic relations are not egalitarian but the socio-economic system is global.

N&R also explain the significance of using a language in the classroom. They show that although it has an important social value, it is not a reliable means of language transmission. In most cases, such as Irish in Ireland (186–187), the language is still not spoken, despite the long tradition of teaching it in school. They state correctly that a language is best transmitted 'in the natural environment of the home' (187), i.e. when spoken as a vernacular. But there are several cases where a language is maintained through its usage as a lingua franca, the case of pidgins in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Papua New Guinea, which have expanded into more complex languages.

The case of Irish underscores again the importance of using a language in the economic system. In fact, indigenized varieties of English and French in Africa and Asia have also been transmitted primarily through the school system, but they thrive because of their association with the white collar sector of the economic systems in which their speakers operate. If they have not displaced more indigenous lingua francas, it is because the latter are used in the lower and/or traditional sectors of the economic systems. The division of labor has protected them in about the same way it has protected nonstandard dialects of European languages in the West, where the standard varieties are used in the white collar sector but the non-standard varieties are acceptable in the lower sectors. It is actually the more indigenous lingua francas in Africa and Asia that have endangered local ethnic languages, which have been deprived of any significant role in the economic systems.[12]

While N&R are correct in arguing that a vernacular has no chance of surviving without support from home, we must also remember that 'home' is just a situation in the larger economic ecology that permeates it and tends to favor languages with outside currency (functioning originally as lingua francas) over those with only limited, domestic currency. Exceptions to this observation include those cases where home is isolated from the mainstream, as with the Old Order Amish in Pennsylvania, or pastoralist and hunter-gatherer communities in East and southern Africa. As much as segregation is despised – and there are indeed good reasons for fighting it when it disadvantages a particular population – it has protected some stigmatized language varieties. This is true of African-American vernacular English,

[12] However, some chapters in Brenzinger (1998) show that some parts of Africa have not developed, nor adopted, any indigenous lingua francas either. Pastoralists and hunter-gatherers still maintain egalitarian linguistic relations. One must simply learn the neighbor's language in order to communicate with them.

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though the fact that it can also be used in the lower economic sectors (just like white nonstandard English varieties) has contributed to its vitality in North America. Its function as a marker of ethnic identity cannot of course be overlooked.

The role of segregation qua separation of residential neighborhoods and/or economic lifestyles may be more important. In exploitation colonies, segregation between Europeans and the indigenous populations generally precluded large-scale adoption of the European colonial languages among the indigenous populations. To date, about forty years after the political independence of most African and Asian former colonies, the appropriation of those colonial languages as the lingua francas of a minority of government officials, administrators, and highly educated nationals is typically a replacement of an external colonial system by an internal one in which the masses of the populations are exploited by their own nationals and the languages are seen as instruments of that domination. To be sure, the languages have acquired more speakers who are eager to compete for political power or socio-economic success, but there are still overwhelming local majorities who are not participating in this competition and are more interested in commanding indigenous, regional lingua francas than the European alternatives. The elite themselves remain fluent in the indigenous alternatives, since they would be unpopular if they ignored the indigenous languages. Thus the threat to minor indigenous languages comes from the indigenous lingua francas rather than from the European languages, and this is more true of urban centers than of rural areas. In places like Kinshasa (in the Democratic Republic of Congo), where there is more prestige in experiencing popular urban life in Lingala, the European language may actually be considered threatened by Lingala's claim of more and more functions among the elite.

3. Final remarks

Vanishing voices ends, unsurprisingly, with arguments against globalization, cultural uniformity, linguistic homogenization. This leaves this particular reader wishing for some explanation of what it takes to revitalize or revive a language successfully and what alternative socio-economic systems N&R have in mind for speakers of the endangered languages.

Overall, N&R say very little about language vitality and about overall costs and benefits to speakers who give up their languages in favor of other alternatives. They bemoan loss of linguistic and cultural diversity, without really showing that they go hand in hand, but they offer no explicit prescription for maintaining language vitality. In particular, and consistent with the party line, they say nothing about how, if they stick to their indigenous languages, the affected populations can adapt to their changed socio-economic ecologies. The most obvious reason given for maintaining

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or preserving languages in *Vanishing voices*, as in other publications to date, appears to be anticipated benefits to linguistics. No particular socio-economic benefits to speakers are articulated; and this causes me to worry about the adequacy of linguists' concern with speakers.

The appropriation of a new language (variety) in a territory is also an adaptive response expected to enhance the survival of the speaker. In those cases where a non-indigenous language (variety) becomes the vernacular, arguments against the shift should normally also articulate the adaptive advantages that the maintenance of the abandoned communicative tradition would present to the community. It's a shame that linguists have generally ignored this facet of language endangerment, despite Ladefoged's (1992) caution that those who advocate the maintenance of endangered languages against the will of their speakers are paternalistic.[13] Also, while there have been references to globalization, rare are explicit discussions of what it is and how it affects cultural and linguistic diversity in the world. Linguistics can be more informative regarding these particular factors.

On the other hand, N&R must be hailed for approaching competition among languages/dialects for prevalence on the model of species sharing the same ecological niche. Thus the languages/dialects often vie for the same communicative functions at the expense of each other. In this context, the authors adopt terms such as 'LANGUAGE MURDER', 'LANGUAGE SUICIDE' ('LINGUICIDE'), and 'KILLER LANGUAGE' (5). Unfortunately, these terms suggest, incorrectly, that the lives of languages and the competition they are engaged in are independent of their speakers' interactions. To be sure, languages DO have lives, but they are also like parasitic species whose vitality depends on the behaviors of their hosts (Mufwene 2001).

I have enjoyed this book more for the impressive number of facts it contains than for the explanations that its authors provide about language vitality. The clarity of the facts also helps the informed reader think of alternative explanations. I used the book in my *Ecology of Language Evolution* class, and it generated a lot of stimulating discussion. I recommend it for classes on the subject matter that is central to it.

There are a few other oddities in the narrative of the book. One of them is the use of the word *indigenous* as in the following sentence: 'the greatest biolinguistic diversity is found in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples' (ix). There are similar uses on pages 13, 21, 22, etc. I am curious whether this characterization excludes territories where the indigenous populations have died or have been displaced, and what those places are. Or, because I know the authors are not extra-terrestrial, I cannot help asking whether Western Europe is one of those places without indigenous populations. I have already

[13] Like Ladefoged, I see no conflict between his position and the urgency of documenting, studying, and literally preserving endangered languages, especially the unwritten ones. However, maintaining them depends largely on the adaptive values of the languages to speakers.

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commented on the terms 'KILLER LANGUAGE', 'LINGUICIDE', and the like, which are rather misleading. In a couple of places, N&R speak of 'PUNCTURING', rather than 'PUNCTUATING', the equilibrium. Because of the central role it plays in N&R's account of language endangerment and loss, the term 'GLOBALIZATION' should have received a more focused and elaborate discussion. Regrettably, this essay is already too long to add it.

However, the term 'BIOLINGUISTIC DIVERSITY' cannot go without a comment. It is unmotivated and actually creates confusion. If languages are species – not necessarily of the same kind as biological species – and have lives, then the term 'BIODIVERSITY' (or the longer phrase 'BIOTIC DIVERSITY') should be enough. One can argue that differences between linguistic and animal species are of the same order as those between, for instance, animal and viral species; evolutionary differences between species are consequences of ontological and transmission properties specific to each of them. On the other hand, 'BIOLINGUISTICS' is more readily interpreted as the connection between language and the biological infrastructure that guarantees its acquisition and those structural universals that Chomsky (1986) accounts for by invoking Universal Grammar (chapter 1 of Jenkins 2000 is quite informative on this topic). Thus the term 'BIOLINGUISTIC DIVERSITY' can be considered contradictory, as it suggests both universality and diversity of Universal Grammar as biological endowment for language. What N&R suggest is a notion of linguistic diversity that is analogous to, and in fact should be the same as, that of biodiversity in ecology.

Still, *Vanishing voices* contributes a wealth of information to scholarship on language endangerment. Lest my discussion be misinterpreted as antagonistic, let me reiterate that N&R have done the field a great service by stepping their discussion beyond where most of the literature has taken us to date. The present article is an invitation to more research that should help us fill many gaps in our knowledge of language vitality, against which language endangerment must be discussed.

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