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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Zombie Linguistics: Experts, Endangered Languages and the Curse of Undead Voices

Bernard C. Perley

The alarming projection that up to ninety per cent of the world’s languages will become extinct by the end of this century has prompted a new sense of urgency among linguists and other language scholars to rush out and record the last utterances from the last speakers of ‘endangered languages’. As the last speaker utters her/his last words, the ‘expert’ is there to record this important moment and preserve it for all time. Among the benefits from such preservation efforts is the ability to play back the recordings at any time in any place. In popular media this process is described as ‘saving the language’ through recording and documentation. Unfortunately, these recordings are not living voices. Rather, they are zombie voices—undead voices that are disembodied and techno-mechanized. They are cursed with being neither dead nor alive. They become artefacts of technological interventions, as well as expert valorisations of linguistic codes. Expert rhetoric compounds the problem by the use of metaphoric frames such as death, endangerment and extinction. Metaphors not only frame discourses of language endangerment, but they also frame and influence actions and interventions. This essay critically evaluates the metaphors used by language experts to understand the unintended consequences for community members who are actively revitalising and reclaiming their languages. The essay also identifies key strategies used by community language activists to ignore existing metaphors, while creating new metaphors to potentiate new solutions to language death to promote emergent vitalities.

Keywords: Expert rhetoric; Language endangerment; Language documentation; Metaphors; Emergent vitalities

Introduction

On 13 April 2010, CNN (Cable News Network) published an online report headlined: Scientist lives as Inuit for a year to save disappearing language (Shaikh 2010). The article explains that a British anthropologist will spend a year living among the...
Inuit in the northernmost village of Greenland and document their language. The anthropologist argues that the village is in danger of being displaced by the effects of global warming, and their move to the city will assimilate them into a different culture. Assimilation will also precipitate the loss of their language and culture. The anthropologist will produce an ‘ethnography of speaking’ that ‘will be a permanent record that shows how their language and culture are interconnected’ (Shaikh 2010).

A critical reading of the article exposes two ironies that are obfuscated by metaphoric rhetoric. First, the anthropologist will document the Inuit language to ‘save’ it before it disappears. Documentation as language salvation has become the operative metaphor used by language experts. The irony is that the documents are artefacts of a living language and not the living language itself. Second, the confusion between the living language and the documentary artefacts has misplaced expert attention on the language as a code rather than language as the conduit and catalyst for social relationships. The irony lies in the fact that the experts are interested in the language as a code, but not the speakers who use the code. These two ironies are obscured by metaphors that capture the popular imagination; specifically, language is articulated as a biological organism that is undergoing species endangerment from outside forces. The metaphor makes it possible to uncouple endangered languages from the community of speakers. This disembodiment of language from speakers reifies language as the object of value that must be ‘saved’, while the speakers are relegated to the role of unwitting casualties victimised by processes greater than themselves. As indicated by the CNN article, the language must be saved because only a language expert can save it. Meanwhile, the people will assimilate to new languages and cultures. The ‘ethnography of speaking’ will be the metaphoric stand-in of the living Inuit language as ‘saved’ by the anthropologist. The rhetoric validates the expert intervention of saving the language through documentation, while occluding the fact that the living language as spoken by the community has ceased to ‘live’ among the speakers.

If the metaphor is extended to the logical extremes of the popular imagination, then the artefacts that comprise the ‘saved’ language are not in their totality the living language. Rather, these languages are neither dead nor alive in that the languages no longer live among active speakers, nor have they vanished or disappeared. They become zombie languages. The practice of producing zombie languages is by metaphorical extension the practice of zombie linguistics. Zombie linguistics, as a practice, has potential unintended consequences for language communities working to revitalise their languages. At the local level, the interests of the expert and the interests of the community can come into conflict. At the global scale, expert interests dominate the discourse, as well as the popular imagination, and only ‘charismatic’ endangered languages will be ‘saved’.

**Metaphors and the Rhetoric of Crisis**

The first decade of the twenty-first century has been a critical period for the production and dissemination of expert assessments of language endangerment and
concomitant calls to action to save endangered languages worldwide. The venues for language scholars to reach a wide audience of non-specialists include books such as atlases (Wurm 2001; Comrie, Matthews, and Polinsky 2003; Austin 2008), surveys (Batibo 2005; Tsunoda 2006; Grenoble and Whaley 2006; Harrison 2007; Evans 2010) and edited volumes (Hinton and Hale 2001; Brenzinger 2007; Duchêne and Heller 2007). Some publications are accompanied by websites to augment the author’s argument and/or provide additional information (Enduring Voices; Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages), while more websites dedicated to language endangerment and documentation continue to increase in number (UNESCO, see Moseley 2010; Our Mother Tongues; Ethnologue: Languages of the World). There are increasing numbers of independent films dedicated to chronicling either the linguists’ efforts (The linguists, Kramer, Miller and Newberger 2008) or the efforts of community members as they struggle to find solutions to the tragedy of language death (We still live here, Makepeace 2010; Language of America, Levine and Schultz n.d.; Miami awakening, Miami Nation of Oklahoma 2008). A common characteristic of all the above public proclamations of language death and language endangerment is the rhetorical strategies used by both the authors and the media outlets. Descriptors such as ‘tragedy’, ‘death’ and ‘extinction’ often accompany expressions such as ‘language endangerment’, ‘saving languages’ and ‘human heritage’ to build a compelling case that will attract public attention, as well as obtain their support for myriad interventions. Jane H. Hill (2002) critically appraises the effects of such ‘expert rhetoric’ and argues that attention must be paid to the audience and the unintended consequences of the message. Hill identifies three strategies in particular that experts need to consider: hyper-valorisation, enumeration and human heritage discourses. The three are neither separated nor mutually exclusive categories. One critical area Hill identifies is the ‘value’ placed on language. She alerts the reader to the complexities and complications when using metaphors to articulate language issues (p. 124). However, despite this important insight, Hill focuses on the rhetoric as the locus for change and overlooks the agentive aspect of metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 3) have argued that metaphors are not only concepts for thinking, but they are also for acting. They suggest that metaphors are systematic, orientational and culturally coherent, and, therefore, not only are they ‘grounded in our physical and cultural experience; they also influence our experiences and our actions’ (p. 68). Noted language experts have acknowledged that their rhetoric is metaphorical (Nettle and Romaine 2000, 6; Harrison 2007, 5), but they neglect the ‘influence’ that metaphors have on their actions, interventions and advocacies. As Hill warns us, the rhetoric and the ensuing actions have direct effects in communities such descriptors target, and instead of solving the problem they may exacerbate the problem by creating other problems. Fortunately, there are growing numbers of community language advocates who recognise the detrimental effect of expert metaphors, and they are working not only to change the metaphors, but also to promote innovative practices at language revitalisation and reclamation. In the following, though the expert rhetoric is global, as are the effects, I restrict my example to the native North...
American context. I do this for two reasons: one, I address the colonial context of language endangerment in native North America; and, two, the examples below are ones on which I have done ethnographic research or have direct knowledge through conversations and observations.

Nettle and Romaine (2000) acknowledge the use of metaphor to describe the phenomenon popularly known as language death. The authors state ‘terms such as “death,” “extinction,” “murder,” and “suicide” applied to language are metaphors, but are such metaphors useful?’ (p. 6). This is an important concession on their part in recognising the rhetoric of similarity, but they are not willing to extend the metaphor to some sociolinguistic situations. They go on to say:

We will argue that the death and extinction (and even murder) perspective is useful because languages are intimately connected to humans, our cultures, and our environment. The notion of language suicide of course puts the blame squarely on the victim. This is not constructive and in any case, is ill-founded. People do not kill themselves on a whim. Suicide is indicative of mental and often physical illness brought about by undue stress. Likewise, people do not fling away their languages for no good reason (p. 6).

The position the authors take for the metaphor ‘language suicide’ is indicative of the broader rhetoric of convenience that language experts use when describing language endangerment. While metaphors are used to convey similarities between human language and species endangerment, the same experts are reticent to follow the logic of the rhetoric to their logical extremes. The fact that Nettle and Romaine state that ‘language suicide’ blames the victim illustrates their myopic view of the conditions that contribute to the endangerment of many languages. I have used the term ‘linguistic suicide’ to alert the reader to the unintended consequences of such rhetorical strategies. Nettle and Romaine articulate a broader argument regarding language extinction throughout human history. Key aspects of their argument emphasise outside influences that undermine the stability of languages. My difficulty with their position is that ‘it perpetuates the victim status of all communities with endangered languages’ (Perley 2011, 142). Furthermore, their perspective as outside experts working on behalf of endangered language communities also perpetuates the helplessness of said communities. Generally, many language experts, be they linguists, sociolinguists, educators, policy makers, anthropologists etc., have dedicated their professional work to helping language endangerment communities. They articulate their advocacy as outsiders with expert knowledge who use their skills and knowledge to work with communities in developing programs and projects designed to avert language death.

My position is more complicated. I am a member of Tobique First Nation, New Brunswick, Canada. The community heritage language is Maliseet. The language has been listed as ‘severely endangered’ by the UNESCO online atlas (Moseley 2010) and has been projected to become ‘extinct’ in two decades by other sources (Perley 2011, 2). Expert diagnoses predict the imminent extinction of the Maliseet language, but these outside assessments do not convey the experience of trauma that language loss
precipitates. For community members of endangered languages, language loss is not an abstraction. The forced disembodiment of heritage languages from speakers is traumatic and tragic. Having experienced that trauma first hand, I know the emotive value of affective descriptors the experts use to describe language loss. I have shared my own experiences regarding the trauma of Maliseet language loss elsewhere (Perley 2009, 2011, 2012), and I recognise that the metaphors used by experts are necessarily partial because they focus on relevant figurative similarities, while ignoring more ‘imaginative’ aspects of metaphoric concepts (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 52–5). As a professional anthropologist, I recognise the utility of metaphor, but my native perspective provides a critical perspective from which I can explore the ‘unused’ parts of the metaphor and think them through to their logical conclusion. The reticence that Nettle and Romaine (2000) expressed when avoiding the metaphor ‘language suicide’ as not ‘useful’ illustrates the unintended consequence of their partial perspective. From my native perspective, I saw the utility of ‘language suicide’ as giving me the opportunity to problematize the use of affective descriptors in discussing language death and to put community actions and decisions back into the discussion of language life and language death’ (Perley 2011, 9). My reason for using ‘linguistic suicide’ as a metaphor for Maliseet language death is not to ‘blame the victim’, but to give the community opportunities to avert language death by ‘extinction’, ‘murder’ or ‘suicide’.

**The Curse of Expert Knowledge**

In 1969, Native American activist and scholar Vine Deloria Jr. published a blistering critique of anthropologists and related social scientists with his essay ‘Anthropologists and Other Friends’. Deloria (1988, 78) begins the chapter with the following:

> Into each life, it is said, some rain must fall. Some people have bad horoscopes, others take tips on the stock market. McNamara created the TFX and the Edsel. Churches possess the real world. But Indians have been cursed above all other people in history. Indians have anthropologists.

Following a brief description of a typical ‘anthro’, Deloria describes the anthropology process as going to reservations to ‘make OBSERVATIONS’ that turn into books ‘by which future anthropologists will be trained’ (p. 79, emphasis in original). Then, summaries of books are produced ‘in the guise of articles’, and those summaries (articles) are condensed into ‘reports justifying the previous summer’s research’ (p. 79). Finally, the reports are turned into ‘the best slogans possible’ (pp. 79–80). As Deloria points out:

> the slogans become conference themes in the early spring, when the anthropology expeditions are being planned. The slogans turn into battle cries of opposing groups of anthropologists who chance to meet on the reservations the following summer (p. 80).

Although acerbic in his characterisation of anthropologists, Deloria identifies the importance of the slogans-cum-battle cries, ‘for two summers they (opposing
anthropologists) have been bested in sloganeering and their funds are running low,’ (p. 80). Clearly, for Deloria, research and funding are co-dependent curses. The resultant curse to Indians, as Deloria argues, is that ‘the massive volume of useless knowledge produced by anthropologists attempting to capture real Indians in a network of theories has contributed substantially to the invisibility of Indian people today’ (p. 81).

I quote Deloria’s scathing critique to highlight his characterisation of the anthropological research processes he witnessed in Native American communities in the 1960s. However, instead of anthropologists, in the first decades of the 21st century the linguists are the experts going to endangered language communities to conduct their research. That research goes through the same processes outlined by Deloria that result in slogans used by competing linguistic camps to obtain funding for research and subsequent publication. Slogans such as ‘language endangerment’ (Grenoble and Whaley 1998), ‘vanishing voices’ (Nettle and Romain 2000), ‘extinction of the world’s languages’ (Harrison, 2007), ‘language diversity endangered’ (Brenzinger 2007) and ‘dying words’ (Evans 2010) are featured sound bites in the titles or on title pages of the most popular texts currently in circulation. Harrison (2007, viii) readily admits the purpose of his book is to highlight the loss of knowledge systems that the loss of languages entail: ‘By demonstrating the beauty, complexity, and the underlying logic of these knowledge systems, I hope to motivate more people—speakers, language-lovers, and scientists alike—to work harder to ensure their survival’. While the sentiment expressed by Harrison is laudable, what is unclear is what form ‘survival’ will take. More often than not, the experts opt for ‘more durable forms’ (Evans 2010, xviii). Evans recognises the fleeting aspects of spoken language and argues:

The classic goal of a descriptive linguist is to distil this knowledge, by a combination of systematic questioning and the recording and transcribing of whatever stories the speaker wishes to tell, into at least a trilogy of grammar, texts, and a dictionary. Increasingly, this is supplemented by sound and video recordings that add information about intonation, gesture, and context (p. xviii).

These durable forms will be what survive of the ‘fleeting sounds and movements’ after the last speakers have long since passed away. To be fair, the impulse to document what is left of endangered languages before they ‘die’, ‘become extinct’ or ‘vanish’ is an important task that has great potential for increasing our awareness of systems of knowledge and ways of being in the world. Documentation as salvation may be the only alternative for severely endangered languages that linguists such as Harrison and Evans are documenting, but what are the implications that these operational metaphors have for endangered language communities who still have members actively using their heritage languages?

Learning to Curse

It is understandable that many language scholars may take exception to my critical appraisal of their rhetoric and practices. The sense of urgency and the calls to action
are based on careful research and analysis. However, the metaphors obscure the long histories of colonialism, domination and repression that have contributed to the endangerment of many languages and the propelling of many others to the brink of extinction. As early as the sixteenth century there was an awareness of what has become a long process of linguistic colonialism.

In Act One, Scene Two of Shakespeare’s (1997, 3066) *Tempest*, the character, Caliban, endures Miranda’s self-congratulatory invective, wherein she says:

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Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
Though thou didst learn, had that in’t which good natures
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou
Deservedly confined into this rock,
Who had deserved more than a prison.
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Caliban’s short reply is angry, but poignant:

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You taught me language, and my profit on’t
Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!
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This brief scene in the *Tempest*, and especially Caliban’s angry retort, serves as the ground for Stephen Greenblatt’s (1990) essay on linguistic colonialism in the sixteenth century, wherein he explores the link between the playwright and colonists. Drawing on Terence Hawkes’s (1973) *Shakespeare’s talking animals*, Greenblatt probes into the implications of linguistic colonialism as a more generalised phenomenon, which over the centuries has effectively eradicated native peoples, their cultures and languages. Anchored in the tense drama that unfolded between colonisers and native peoples, the ideologies that privileged colonial cultures, customs and languages continue to imperil indigenous languages today. Nettle and Romaine (2000) sketch out the magnitude of the tragedy of language loss by providing statistics and percentages that highlight the rates of extinction on each continent. For North America, drawing statistics from the work of linguist Michael Krauss (1992), they estimate that ‘80 per cent (149 out of 187) of the native Indian languages are no longer being learned by children’ (p. 8). Again, drawing on the work of Krauss, for Central America they suggest that 17 per cent are no longer viable. Nettle and Romaine (2000, 9) state:
The worst case, however, is Australia, with 90 percent of its estimated 250 Aboriginal languages near extinction. Only some 50 languages are widely spoken today and of these only 18 have at least 500 speakers. These 18 account for roughly 25,000 of the remaining 30,000 speakers of Aboriginal languages. There is no Aboriginal language that is used in all areas of everyday life by members of a sizable community. It is possible that only two or three of the languages will survive into the next century.

The rhetorical strategy of enumeration provides compelling evidence for the unfolding tragedy, but it also hides the underlying ideology of today’s language experts: specifically, first, the long history of linguistic colonialism has forced many native communities to speak (as well as curse and curse in) the colonial languages; and, second, today’s rhetoric also masks the privileged status of expert knowledge, as experts promote saving languages through documentation. This provides native peoples more reasons to curse.

In the summer of 2011, I was invited by a dear friend to visit her family at their home on the community reservation. She also wanted to introduce me to her friends who were teaching the heritage language and culture, so she had arranged a round table conversation with the community elementary school language and culture teachers, in order that we could share experiences and ideas about language revitalisation. The conversation was held in the native language classroom. The room was adorned with vocabulary lists, traditional arts and crafts, and lined with books used to teach the heritage language. After introductions the conversation immediately went into language teaching strategies and the challenges they faced working in a community where English had become the children’s first language. The conversation had shifted to expert preferences for documenting endangered languages. I mentioned that I describe documentation as mortuary linguistics. It is a ghoulish process where linguists go out to find the last speakers of dying languages and record their last words. That is not saving the language. It is mortuary linguistics. I stated that the linguists are more interested in the code than they are in the people. At this point one of the language teachers spoke up and said:

Yeah, you’re right. We have a linguist working with us, and she does a terrific job. But all she wants us to do is documentation to preserve what our speakers are saying before they die. I know that’s important, but I want to teach the children to speak the language.

This teacher understood the linguist’s perspective and the importance of documentation, but he also understood that placing all their efforts in documenting all the speech events produced by their elders would preserve those events, but it would do so at the expense of the children and their opportunity to acquire the heritage language. The added burden of limited resources compounded the dilemma; they could not do it all.

The conversation shifted to what they were teaching and what the students were learning. The same teacher spoke up and said that he was teaching the children the
numbers in the heritage language. He said the students were good about participating in class exercises, and he felt they were learning the numbers well. What he did not know was just how well the students learned the numbers. He recalled one day during recess he saw some of the boys gathered around a table playing a popular card game. The game required challenges and responses using numbers. Much to his surprise, the young boys were using the heritage language numbers. The teacher said, ‘I was surprised they were using the heritage numbers and using them so quickly! I couldn’t use the numbers that quickly!’ We all laughed, and we agreed that those were the most beautiful moments in language instruction. The young boys had taken ownership of the language and applied it to new domains of usage. It was an example of youthful creativity at its best. While the tension continues between the proponents of language documentation and the teachers in heritage language classes, a new generation of language users are using new media in new domains to create new possibilities for language vitality.

New Metaphors for Emergent Vitalities

The example of youthful creativity in heritage language use is a reflection of the inspiring and encouraging work being done by language activists within endangered language communities. One of the most important strategies used to revitalise and reclaim heritage languages is to change the metaphors used to describe the relative state of vitality by which the subject language is characterised. The UNESCO categories are ‘safe’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘definitely endangered’, ‘severely endangered’ and ‘extinct’ (Moseley 2010). The UNESCO online interactive atlas provides a short profile on Maliseet-Passamaquoddy in which they list the language as ‘severely endangered’. My own research (Perley 2011) on Maliseet as spoken at Tobique First Nation confirms the UNESCO diagnosis. In assessing the relative state of vitality for spoken Maliseet at Tobique First Nation, I used Annette Schmidt’s (1990) diagnostic study of Australia’s Aboriginal languages and found similar processes undermining Canada’s First Nations languages. Schmidt’s ‘downward spiral’ model traces a trajectory that can only lead to language extinction (p. 21). Yet, my experience in the community has allowed me to recognise the importance of diagnostic studies, but it also reminded me that the communities decide the fate of heritage languages. As UNESCO states on its endangered language site:

this process is neither inevitable nor irreversible; well-planned and implemented language policies can bolster the ongoing efforts of speaker communities to maintain or revitalize their mother tongue and pass them on to younger generations (Moseley 2010).

Some community projects at Tobique First Nation offer some examples of the possibilities the UNESCO statement suggests. Those community efforts are what I call emergent vitalities.
'Emergent Vitalities'

The community of Tobique First Nation is aware of the ‘endangered’ state of the Maliseet language. Some measures are in place to avert language death, such as an elementary school language program, as well as the formation of a Maliseet language curriculum committee. Other activities include off-reservation institutional projects, such as publishing dictionaries, scheduling language classes and organising language immersion training. These activities are the formal projects designed and operated by institutional entities to serve community needs. The results are predictable and conform to expert design and implementation. However, there are community members who create new and unexpected vitalities for the Maliseet language. One project provides Maliseet voice-overs for a television series on Aboriginal (Canadian) storytellers. The original series was filmed in English, but the producer decided to translate all the interviews into Maliseet. He then identified Maliseet language speakers from the community to provide the voices for all the different people interviewed in the series. The program was aired on Canada’s Aboriginal People’s Television Network (APTN). The voice-overs provided a new medium for the Maliseet language. The program also disseminated the Maliseet language across Canada, thereby increasing the range of the language. The added benefit of the project was the ‘documentation’ of the creative use of the Maliseet language. The program has been recorded onto DVDs and can be played at anytime and anywhere. However, the most important contribution was bringing together many Maliseet speakers and encouraging them to use the language in a new medium. The creation of new social contexts for new language domains is key to rethinking the expert rhetoric of Maliseet language endangerment and to promoting emergent vitalities of the Maliseet language.

The creation of new domains for the Maliseet language comes from the skills and creativity of the members of the community. A second example of emergent vitality is closer to home. My mother is a gifted speaker of both Maliseet and English. She had a visitor one afternoon who asked her if she could translate a children’s book from English into Maliseet. She said ‘yes’, and the visitor gave her the book. She translated the title, turned to the title page and translated that as well. She continued without pause (except for necessary prosodic effect in the storytelling) until she reached the end of the book. The visitor was ‘blown away’ (his words) by my mother’s ability to translate the text. The visitor organised the recording session, and my mother went to the ‘studio’ to translate the text. The translation team worked on the project and produced a DVD recording of my mother reading *Rough weather ahead for Walter the farting dog* (Kotzwinkle, Murray and Gundy 2005). Among the participants in the team was the author of the children’s book (a non-native). He was delighted with the project. As I listened to the different participants—the author, the organiser, the technician, the transcriber and my mother—the aspect of the project that stood out with all of them was the fun they had producing the DVD. Each person recounted the process in their own way, but each one said they had a lot of fun, and they all laughed while telling their stories. Again, as before, the DVD is a document that recorded my
mother using the Maliseet language in a new medium. The DVD will have limited
circulation for the reservation, but it can be accessed at any time. The medium
preserves my mother’s voice, and that is important and valuable. However, the new
medium, the new domain and the new relationships that were created because of the
project are where language vitality is most important. These two examples, the
television broadcast transmission with the accompanying videos of Maliseet voice-
overs and the children’s book translation project, are the exciting products of
community creativity, as they create new domains in new media. Most important,
they create new social contexts for using the Maliseet language. Institutions and
experts may offer formal structures and attendant expectations, but the life of the
language is best witnessed when speakers use it to create new relationships. Instead of
focusing on documentation as a remedy for language death, these community
members are using and speaking Maliseet in new ways and thereby practising
emergent vitalities of the Maliseet language. The ‘documents’ are the artefacts of the
social life of the Maliseet language.

‘Extinction’ or ‘Sleeping’?

Emergent vitalities have particular salience in cases where the heritage language has
been declared ‘dead’ or ‘extinct’. The above examples illustrate the creative work
initiated by community members who are engaged in promoting language vitality,
but the innovative work done by language advocates whose heritage language is no
longer spoken provides another challenge for the prevailing metaphor of language
death and extinction. Some extinct languages refuse to stay silent (Hinton 2001).
There are a number of excellent examples that include Hebrew, Cornish (United
Kingdom), Kaurna (Adelaide, South Australia) and the recently celebrated
Wampanoag language (Cape Cod, Massachusetts, USA). There are two lesser-
known examples that provide a clear rethinking of the metaphors of ‘dead’ and
‘extinction’ and the inspiration that one case provides for another. The first is the
awakening of the Miami language, and the second is the awakening of Huron-
Wendat.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Linguistics Department recently hosted
their 26th Linguistic Symposium. The theme of the 2011 symposium was ‘Language
death, endangerment, documentation, and revitalization’. The symposium featured
many renowned linguists who are recognised experts in their fields. One of the
keynote speakers is not only a trained linguist, but he is also a member of a
community whose heritage language had been declared extinct by the experts. Daryl
Baldwin is a member of the Miami Nation of Oklahoma, and he is also the key figure
in the awakening of the Miami language. In the opening scenes of the Miami Tribe of
Oklahoma (2008) video myaamiaki eemamwiciki, Miami awakening, Baldwin reflects
on the metaphor of language extinction. He states that from the biological
perspective ‘extinct means gone forever’. He goes on to apply the metaphor to
language and recognises the implications of the metaphor. He reflects: ‘Maybe these
academics are wrong. Maybe we can reconnect. Maybe Miami can be the language of emotion, the language of thought, not just the language of speech’.

Those reflections turned into his own efforts to awaken the Miami language. Baldwin started by introducing Miami to his children through home schooling. He then began working with the linguist, David Costa, on Miami phonology and morphology to develop materials for language instruction. The next step was to initiate summer language camps, and use the language materials in the camp. Next, the Miami tribal communities became involved in supporting the reclamation efforts. These efforts led to community discussions with Miami University of Ohio. The long-standing relationship between the Miami communities and Miami University culminated in the Myaamia Project. With the support of Miami University and the Miami Nation, and support and interest from members of the community, Daryl Baldwin is now witnessing the awakening of the Miami language.

Significantly, Daryl reframed the metaphor from ‘extinction’ to ‘awakening’. He did not stop with the ‘maybe’ questions. Instead, he initiated the restoration of a Miami worldview, a Miami way of being in the world and the attention to restoring critical Miami relationships. Baldwin (Baldwin and Olds 2007, 290) states:

The Myaamia Project is a tool of immeasurable value to the Miami Nation. Born of a respectful relationship between a sovereign nation and an educational institution located on the lands of our ancestors, the Myaamia Project is acknowledged by our people as the cornerstone to our ultimate success in reclaiming our language and restoring our traditional worldview which will ensure the perpetuation of our great Miami Nation.

Baldwin’s presentation at the symposium traced the development of the Myaamia Project and explained that the wealth of documentation that was produced over the centuries, in addition to comparisons to closely related languages still spoken today, were instrumental in providing Costa and himself the opportunity to reconstruct the phonological aspects of Miami. The critical distinction to draw from the Miami case is the shifting of metaphors from ‘extinction’ and ‘death’ to ‘sleeping’. This may seem like semantic hair-splitting, but the anticipated end result is a viable living Miami language. It may not be the Miami language that would have been spoken if the communities had been able to maintain their heritage language, but the awakened form of Miami is new life for an ancient language. In short, the Myaamia project is very much about emergent vitalities. Daryl Baldwin’s presentation was an important voice at a symposium where established scholars and young scholars were exchanging ideas about language vitality. Language documentation was one of the important and most discussed themes at the symposium, but Baldwin’s presentation was inspiring for all symposium attendees. One young woman found inspiration and renewed determination for her own work.

Megan Lukaniec, a member of the Huron-Wendat Nation in Quebec, Canada, began her presentation with a slide of a forest in autumn when all the leaves were changing colour. She explained that the forest is a metaphor for how she feels as she
attempts to reclaim her heritage language. Like Baldwin, Lukaniec had to draw from extensive documents produced over the centuries to reconstruct the spoken language. Her story paralleled Baldwin’s quite closely. The significant difference between the two was the length of time that Baldwin had been working on awakening the Miami language. Lukaniec, who was just starting the process, welcomed the opportunity to seek guidance and advice from Baldwin. Lukaniec could not accept the biological finality that language extinction implies. Hearing about how Baldwin persevered against long odds gave Lukaniec hope and determination that her heritage language could also be awakened. Her presentation echoed Baldwin’s when she talked about the growing community involvement and the new social relationships the language project created. Both Baldwin and Lukaniec recognised that it was not just the language, but also a sense of community that was awakened. Centuries of documentation ‘preserved’ both languages, but it was the speakers who breathed new life into the languages. One of the most important contributions these two community language activists made to the conference was the critical rethinking of the metaphors used to describe the global phenomenon popularly known as language death and extinction. Shifting the metaphor to sleeping languages allows communities like the Miami Nation and the Huron-Wendat to awaken their languages. The ‘sleeping’ metaphor can provide new hope for sleeping languages, as community members conceive emergent vitalities for their heritage languages as they awaken them.

Conclusion: Grave Kangaroos and the Efficacy of Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that metaphors are by necessity partial. I agree with their statement, but I would add that ‘partial’ also means ‘biased’, in that the metaphors are also biased toward kinds of interventions language experts too often propose without critical reflection. The dangers of metaphoric imprecision can lead to gross misunderstanding for all affected parties. Take, for example, this account of folk taxonomies from K. David Harrison (2007, 38–9):

The Kaurna people, aboriginal Australians living near Adelaide, upon first encountering horses in the early 1800s dubbed them “European kangaroos”. They combined *pindi*, their word for white man, with *nanto* “male kangaroo”. In fact, *pindi* was also a metaphor. The Kaurna called pale-skinned Europeans *pindi* meaning grave because they took them to be spirits of the dead returned from the grave. So horse was “white man’s kangaroo” or literally “grave kangaroo”. Across the cultural divide, Captain James Cook was similarly befuddled when he first encountered kangaroos. He noted in his journal that they bore “no sort of resemblance to any European animal” and compared them in turn to a hare, a greyhound, and a deer.

The lesson to consider is that when experts start using metaphors to appeal to a popular audience, they begin to slip from their scientific taxonomies toward popular folk taxonomies anchored in metaphors. When this happens, they can become blinded to the consequences and the harm their metaphors can inflict through the actions prompted by their metaphors.
Similarly, my use of the metaphor ‘zombie linguistics’ is just as partial, in both senses of the word, as the expert metaphors of ‘death’ and ‘extinction’. It is a metaphor of logical extreme that calls attention to the unintended consequences of ‘documentation only’ projects. Most important, it is intended to shift the focus of language experts documenting languages to include ‘saving’ communicative practice, while preserving the code. The metaphor is biased toward language use in maintaining social relationships, and this is key for communities whose languages are considered endangered. ‘Zombie linguistics’ may seem to be acerbic in tone and it may have the unintended consequence of alienating linguists and other experts. That would be an unfortunate and unintended consequence. My hope is the metaphor serves as an invitation to language experts and community advocates to realign their language advocacy work, so they can work collaboratively on revitalisation and documentation. Documentation is only part of the solution. So, too, is communicative practice. To achieve heritage language vitality the mutual dependency of language experts and community advocates must be recognised and celebrated. Language documentation experts need access to speakers to produce their artefacts, and community advocates need the artefacts produced by language experts to maintain and innovate communicative practice. The co-dependency between experts and heritage language communities is especially important in communities ‘awakening’ their ‘sleeping’ languages. Awakening such languages would not be possible unless extensive documentation had taken place before the language was deemed ‘dead’ or ‘extinct’. Significantly, communities working to awaken their heritage languages must draw from the documents produced by linguists, missionaries and others who have documented their languages. Today, linguists are working closely with these community advocates to help them awaken their languages. While the partiality of the metaphors ‘sleeping’ and ‘awakening’ are directed toward reframing language ontologies from ‘dead’ and ‘extinct’ to ‘sleeping’, they also allow both community advocates and language experts to conceive of other alternative language vitalities. No metaphor can adequately stand-in for a contested and processual endeavour such as language documentation and language revitalisation, but recognition of mutual dependency may provide the ground for new metaphors that initiate coordinated efforts promoting new life for heritage languages.

As we reflect on the state of linguistic knowledge in the second decade of this new millennium, can we anticipate that linguists will critically examine their rhetoric and the implications of their metaphors? Will we be facing the equivalent of a zombie linguistic apocalypse where we will witness the global proliferation of zombie languages as linguists dash out to document dying words? If not, we may have to change the title of Vine Deloria Jr.’s chapter from Anthropologists and other friends to Linguists and other friends. We may have to change the last two sentences in the opening paragraph to read ‘But endangered language communities have been cursed above all people in history. Endangered language communities have linguists’. The recent books Dying words: Endangered languages and what they have to tell us (Evans 2010) and When languages die: The extinction of the world’s languages and the erosion
of human knowledge (Harrison 2007) suggest that the zombie apocalypse is upon us. However, if the conversations that took place at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee symposium are any indication of where research on language documentation and revitalisation are going, we can be assured that the collaboration between the experts and the community advocates will prompt new metaphors and new possibilities for language research and vitality. Recent ethnographic studies, such as Meek’s (2010) We are our language: An ethnography of language revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan community, and my own Defying Maliseet language death: Emergent vitalities of language, culture and identity in Eastern Canada (Perley 2011), suggest that endangered communities are breathing life back into their heritage languages and that the metaphors of dying, death and extinction are giving way to revitalisation, awakening and other emergent vitalities.

Notes

[1] There are many important antecedent works on language endangerment in the previous two decades that the space in this essay will not permit me to review. Among the most significant contributions include the work of Nancy Dorian (1981, 1989), Joshua Fishman (1991, 2001) and Grenoble and Whaley (1998). Their work generated much of the theoretical as well as practical discussions by linguists and other language scholars in understanding the phenomenon and the considerations of how to provide skills and strategies for expert intervention. For the Australian context, Annette Schmidt (1990) provides an important report on the state of Aboriginal languages. For the African context see Brenzinger (1998).

[2] The UNESCO online atlas provides an explanation of their method for determining relative vitality for the world’s languages. Their example is based on the Australian context: ‘The National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005, prepared by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies at the request of the Australian Government, provides an analysis of the situation of Australian indigenous languages based on UNESCO’s nine Language Vitality factors. Among its most significant findings, the report determined that only 145 of Australia’s more than 250 known indigenous languages continue actually to be spoken. In addition, approximately 110 of them have been classified as severely or critically endangered. Only 18 indigenous languages are described as “strong” according to such a crucial factor as intergenerational transmission’ (UNESCO, Language Vitality).


[4] I deliberately omit the names of the participants, the community and the name of their heritage language to maintain their privacy.

References


Meek, B. A. 2010. We are our language: An ethnography of language revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan community. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.


