Endangered languages

Language loss and community response

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Western language ideologies and small-language prospects

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It might be said with a certain metaphorlic license that languages are seldom admired to death but are frequently despised to death. That is, it's relatively rare for a language to become so exclusively tied to prestigious persons and high-prestige behaviors that ordinary people become too much in awe of it to use it or are prevented by language custodians from doing so. By contrast, it's fairly common for a language to become so exclusively associated with low-prestige people and their socially disfavored identities that its own potential speakers prefer to distance themselves from it and adopt some other language. Parents in these circumstances will make a conscious or unconscious decision not to transmit the ancestral language to their children, and yet another language will be lost. The power of the social forces involved is evidently considerable, since under better circumstances attachment to an ancestral mother tongue is usually strong. The phenomenon of ancestral-language abandonment is worth looking at, then, precisely because a good many people, especially those who speak unthreatened languages, are likely to have trouble imagining that they themselves could ever be brought to the point of giving up on their own ancestral language and encouraging their children to use some other language instead.

Unless they become fossilized so that they persist in specialized uses without ordinary speakers, as sometimes happens in connection with religious practices (Latin, Sanskrit, Coptic Egyptian, Ge'ez, etc.), languages have the standing that their speakers have. If the people who speak a language have power and prestige, the language they speak will enjoy high prestige as well. If the people who speak a language have little power and

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low prestige, their language is unlikely to be well thought of. Because the standing of a language is so intimately tied to that of its speakers, enormous reversals in the prestige of a language can take place within a very short time span. The arrival of the Spaniards brought about precipitous changes of this kind in the fortunes of two major New World languages, that of the Aztec empire in North America and that of the Inka empire in South America. Both had achieved great dominance, expanding at the expense of neighboring languages for some centuries as the Aztecs and Inkas conquered new territories and made ever more peoples subject to their rule (Heath 1972; Heath and Laprade 1982). In a stunningly short time both empires were brought low by their encounter with the better armed Spanish, who represented an expanding Old World power. Neither imperial language disappeared, but each survived with severely reduced social standing. Today Nahuatl and Quechua are low prestige speech forms within the regions where they are spoken, and each is under some threat from still expanding Spanish.

To be sure, cases exist in which a conquering power has given up its own language and adopted the language of the very people whom it has conquered. The Vikings seem to have been particularly susceptible to this, going over to Romance speech forms in Normandy and Sicily and to a Slavic speech form in Russia. It is not unique to them, however; the western Franks and the Bulgars followed a similar pattern, as did the Normans in England, repeating the pattern of their Viking forebears in Normandy. In such cases the conquering group is usually numerically thin, compared with the size of the conquered population, and it may deliberately intermarry with the indigenous aristocracy (for lack of enough women of its own group or for the sake of adding legitimacy to its seizure of local power and property, or both). Distance from the original homeland probably plays a role in some such cases, as in the Viking kingdoms, all established far from Scandinavia. Military loss of home territories can have the same distancing effect. The anglicization of the Normans in England might have been delayed or even prevented if they had been able to retain control of Normandy; but they lost their Norman territories less than a century and a half after conquering England, and from that time forward their focus was on their English territories.

In any event, these are the unusual cases rather than the norm. In the more usual cases, the group that exercises military or political power over others will establish its own language as the language of governance in its contacts with those others. And when one speech form enjoys a favored position as the language of those who control obvious power positions (as administrators, governors, judicial officers, military officers, religious officials, major landholders, and so forth), it requires no great sagacity, but only common sense, to see that it's likely to be useful to acquire some knowledge of that language. If members of a subordinate population have the opportunity to learn the language of the dominant group, some or all of them will usually do so. They will not necessarily give up their own ancestral language, however. It seems likely that it's not so much the tendency to learn a dominant-group language which has increased a great deal in modern times, but rather the opportunity to do so, and, concomitantly and more importantly for linguistic diversity, the tendency to abandon one's ancestral language entirely in the process. To understand this last phenomenon, it may be necessary to consider what in the last two centuries or so is characteristic of Western (i.e. European-derived) attitudes toward non-standard speech forms, since tendencies towards complete ancestral-language abandonment seem to be very strong in the widely distributed areas of European settlement.

Ruling powers have not always expected subordinate peoples to give up their ancestral languages or encouraged them to adopt the language of the dominant group. The Ottoman Empire encompassed an extraordinary variety of subordinate ethnic groups but permitted them to retain a good deal of their ethnic identity, including native religious and linguistic practices, in the various milletler ("nations") within its domains. Even European states were moderately permissive of ethnic languages until relatively recent times. The rise of nationalism in Western Europe at the beginning of the industrial age coincides to a considerable extent with less tolerant attitudes towards subordinate languages. In the present day, for example, France has shown unusual intolerance of ethnic distinctiveness, even for a Western European country (refusing birth certificates and identity cards to children with Breton given names, for example, as recently as the 1970s [New York Times 1975]). Yet cultural and linguistic diversity was an unproblematic fact of life in France until the 1790s, when in the aftermath of the French Revolution a need for a unifying national identity, expressed in part by a single national language, was rather suddenly perceived (Grillo 1989:22-42; Kuter 1989:76).
The fact that powerful pressures for cultural and linguistic unity emerged in France around the time of the Revolution is not accidental from the perspective of some students of nationalism. Rather the pressures emerged at that time because of the particular stage of development the country was reaching and the changes attendant on such a stage. Ernest Gellner identifies a pre-industrial "agro-literate polity" in which the uppermost social strata (e.g. nobility, clergy, merchants) are sharply layered horizontally vis-à-vis one another, with the layers prevailing across the polity as a whole, while a variety of distinct small communities coexist, laterally separate from each other, within the polity and beneath the upper strata. In societies with this sort of social organization, Gellner (1983:30) describes the state as "interested in extracting taxes, maintaining the peace, and not much else, and...[with] no interest in promoting lateral communication between its subject communities." In industrial societies, by contrast, conditions are quite different. Industrial means of production require universal literacy and numerical skills such that individuals can communicate immediately and effectively with people previously unknown to them. Forms of communication must therefore be standardized and able to operate free of local or personal context. This in turn places great importance on educational institutions, which must produce individuals with certain generic capacities that permit slotting and re-slotting into a variety of economic roles. The state is the only organizational level at which an educational infrastructure of the necessary size and costliness can be mounted (Gellner 1983:35-38).

France offers a particularly good (and particularly well-studied) example of rising standard-language dominance at the dawn of the industrial age. At the time of the Revolution, France was passing out of the agro-literate stage of development into a pre-industrial stage, and with a new focus on the polity as a totality the fact that a number of sizable subcommunities such as the Bretons, Basques, Alsatians, and Occitans were incapable of understanding and speaking French became unacceptable. In 1794 the Abbé GREGoire, priest and revolutionary, presented a report to the National Convention in which he detailed this lamentable situation and called for the universalization of the French language. Under the monarchy, as the revolutionaries saw it, linguistic heterogeneity had been useful to the crown as a means of keeping various feudal constituencies from making common cause with one another (Grillo 1989:35). In the revolutionary French state there could be no place for such policies. As part of the social and ideological transformation they were engaged in, the citizens would be unified by common use of a single language, namely the French language (Grillo 1989:30, 34).

Sentiment that could be called nationalistic had grown in France from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, as the French crown increased its geographic domain and its political strength (Joseph 1987:133). Although France had no actual policy of linguistic unification before the Revolution, the prestige of French had been uniquely high nonetheless. The king and his court spoke French, and from that ultimate milieu of power and status the French language gained unrivaled luster (Grillo 1989:29). The championing of French after the Revolution was perfectly in keeping with the usual linkage between high-prestige people and a favored speech form, despite the Revolution's abrupt termination of the French monarchy. So, too, was the disfavoring of speech varieties spoken by the relatively low-prestige peoples of the country. The speech forms of "vulgar" classes of people were tainted by the status of their speakers: they, too, were "vulgar." Already in 1790, when the Abbé GREGoire conducted a survey that included questions about the influence of patois (by which he meant both French dialects and non-French vernaculars such as Basque and Breton) and about the consequences of destroying it in the various regions of France, the letters he received in reply to his questions indicated very low opinions of the various regional speech forms, which were labeled coarse and stupid and were considered to keep the people ignorant and superstitious (Grillo 1989:31, 174).

These were in fact commonplace attitudes in European polities. Grillo (1989:173-74) states bluntly – and accurately, I think – that "an integral feature of the system of linguistic stratification in Europe is an ideology of contempt: subordinate languages are despised languages." This has been true both where regional dialects are concerned and where the languages of subordinate ethnicities are concerned. In his study of the rise of language standards and standard languages, Joseph (1987:31) suggests that language is particularly susceptible to what he calls "prestige transfer":

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1 They were not uncommon in non-European contexts either. For that matter, the Aztecs used a variety of unflattering terms for the languages of their subject peoples, none of which stuck and became the name by which the language is still known, at least to outsiders. Derogatory language names derived from Aztec labels include Chontal "foreigner", Popoloca "unintelligible", and Tootonac "rustic" (Heath 1972:3).
General issues

Because the intrinsic worth of dialects and of their component elements and processes is well nigh impossible to determine, language is highly susceptible to prestige transfer. Persons who are prestigious for quantifiable reasons, physical or material, are on this account emulated by the rest of the community. These others cannot obtain the physical or material resources which confer the prestige directly (at least they cannot obtain them easily, or else no prestige would be associated with them). But prestige is transferred to attributes of the prestigious persons other than those on which their prestige is founded, and these prestigious-by-transfer attributes include things which others in the community may more easily imitate and acquire, if they so choose. Language is one of these.

He further considers that “the power which prestigious dialects hold over non-prestigious speakers goes beyond what logic and rationality can predict or account for,” and that the prestige-holding segment of a population can use the mechanisms of prestige-language standardization to maintain and increase linguistic differences between themselves and speakers of less prestigious speech forms (ibid.). The histories of several of the national languages of Europe, very conspicuously those of French and English (Grillo 1989), are histories of a growing monopoly on legitimacy and prestige by a single dominant speech form, all others being relegated to inferior status. The standard language is typically considered a rich, precise, rationally organized and rationally organizing instrument; dialects and ethnic-minority languages, by contrast, are considered impoverished and crude, most likely inadequate to organize the subordinate world itself and certainly inadequate to organize other worlds. European states such as

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France and Great Britain were unusual perhaps chiefly in their determined allocation of unique prestige and legitimacy to a single carefully cultivated supra-local speech variety as the nation’s official language. They were not unusual, certainly, in their allocation of higher prestige to a speech variety originally used by a materially more favored group or in their assumption of the superiority of their own mother tongues. Social status, whatever its basis, seems very generally to rub off on language, as Joseph indicates, so that the possession of wealth, however that wealth is calculated, will enhance not only the social position of the wealthy people but also the social position of the language that they speak. In East Africa, where the “cattle complex” prevails and wealth is measured by the size of the cattle herd, the languages of cattle-herding pastoralists have frequently displaced the languages of hunter-gatherers who own no cattle (Dimmendaal 1989: 16–24).

Europeans who came with histories of standardizing and promoting just one high-prestige speech form carried their “ideology of contempt” for subordinate languages with them when they conquered far-flung territories, to the serious detriment of indigenous languages. And in addition to a language ideology favoring a single normalized language, derived from the history of national-language standardization in their homelands, Europeans espoused other ideologies that exacerbated their contempt for whatever unstandardized vernaculars they encountered. They seriously confounded technological and linguistic development, for example. Unable to conceive that a people who lacked a rich material culture might possess a highly developed, richly complex language, they wrongly assumed that primitive technological means implied primitive linguistic means. This misconception condemned most Europeans to total exclusion from the diverse conceptual worlds and rich oral literatures of many peoples whom they encountered; but much more unfortunately, it

1 One result of this is a tendency among other-language speakers in contact with standard-language speakers to consider that any feature in which their own language differs markedly from the standard language must indicate some own-language deficiency. In Scottish Gaelic the adjective normally follows the noun. Unfortunately for Gaelic speakers, the dominant standard language to which they compare their own is English rather than French. In East Sutherland, Gaelic speakers frequently remark that Gaelic “puts the cart before the horse” in this regard, implying a falling on the part of Gaelic (since carts don’t belong before horses). That is, they assume that English, which they were taught in school, represents things as they ought to be.

2 Because the ancestral language is measured against dominant-language norms, it’s difficult for speakers who have no special training – and often no schooling in the ancestral language at all – to see in a positive light any unique or highly developed features of their own language. Gaelic, for example, has a very rich system of emphatic suffixes which can attach to nouns, adjectives, many pronouns, and a few verbal forms. Although the emphatic suffixes lend Gaelic a distinctive flavor and constitute a rich discourse device, I’ve never heard an ordinary Gaelic speaker speak so much as mention the emphatic suffixes, let alone praise them for their subtle effects they make possible in creating discourse tone and expressing point of view and social distance.

3 Language ideologies/linguistic ideologies are defined by Silverstein (1976:23) as “acts of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived structure and use” and by Ramsey (1990:346) as “shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world” (cited in Krook 1993 and Woolard 1992 respectively).

4 There is no evidence, unfortunately, that much progress has been made on this score. Even today only specialists seem to think otherwise, and when linguists and linguistic anthropologists discuss the language endangerment crisis with non-specialists, it’s nearly always necessary to make clear at the very outset that the languages threatened with extinction are fully developed instruments capable of great precision and rich elaboration in cognitive terms.
misled many Europeans into doubting the very humanity of peoples whose languages they mistakenly took to be primitive and undeveloped.

Two other European beliefs about language are also likely to have had an unfavorable impact on the survival of indigenous languages in the very considerable portions of the globe where a standardized European language became the language of the dominant social strata (including previously annexed or conquered regions of the home country itself). Particularly widespread and well established is a belief in a linguistic survival of the fittest, a social Darwinism of language. This belief encourages people of European background to assume a correlation between adaptive and expressive capacity in a language and that language’s survival and spread. Since their own languages are prominent among those which have both survived and spread, this is of course a self-serving belief. For obvious reasons it’s also a belief more widespread among English, French, and Spanish speakers than among Czechs or Icelanders, but even among speakers of the smaller standardized and state-promoted languages of Europe there often lurks a notion that the general Indo-European type of language is exceptionally well suited to clear thinking and precise expression. Difficult as it often is to convince non-specialists of the full grammatical and expressive development of all natural languages, it can be even more difficult (without delivering a lecture on the structural properties of the world’s languages, assuming an audience willing to sit still for such a lecture) to persuade them of the extremely useful features of many non-Indo-European language structures, such as, for example, obligatory evidential markers in the verbal system. (Evidentials are discussed in detail in Mithun’s chapter in this volume.)

Notions about the “natural” ability of certain languages to thrive and the “natural” inability of others to do so can be seriously entertained only by people who are not aware of the sudden reversals of linguistic fortune that have occurred when polities have fallen on hard times. Sumerian and Akkadian, two spectacularly successful Mesopotamian languages in their time (though the first two-thirds and the last third of the third millennium BCE respectively), not only waned after the falls of Sumer and Akkad but became entirely extinct in the end. Greek, if it crashed less drastically, is today more often learned by non-Greeks in a form that has not been spoken for 2,000 years than in its contemporary form as the living language of a small and not especially prosperous European country. Quechua and Nahuatl, the proud languages of once-thriving New World empires, still have strong representation in sheer numbers of speakers but each has poor social standing. Quechua has official-language status in Bolivia and (since 1975 only) in Peru, but not in Ecuador or Chile. Nahuatl has no official status and is seriously threatened in certain Mexican regions where few if any children are acquiring it. The existence of a writing system and even the existence of a notable literature do not necessarily ensure that a language will survive as a living speech form, much less thrive. Hittite has left us copious written materials, yet it is extinct. Irish was one of the earliest northern European languages to be written, and the literature and learning of early Irish are quite distinguished; but as a naturally acquired mother tongue it had declined to the status of a peasant language before late nineteenth-century Irish nationalism encouraged its cultivation once again in literary and expository forms.

The second of the additional beliefs disadvantageous to indigenous languages in regions dominated by speakers of European languages may actually be more characteristic of Anglophones than of speakers of other European languages. Anglophones however are particularly thickly distributed in regions that once had large numbers of indigenous languages, so English single-handedly threatens a disproportionate number of other languages. The belief in question is that bilingualism (and by extension multilingualism, all the more so) is onerous, even on the individual level. This belief is so widespread, in fact, that it can be detected even among linguists. Not long ago in reviewing a collection of linguistic papers about first-language attrition I was startled to find that the editors saw bilingualism above all as “a natural setting for the unraveling of native language abilities” (Seliger and Vago 1991:1). The model of bilingual capacity that

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5 There is no general awareness of such problems as the poor fit between spoken language and orthography which makes English and French such unnecessarily difficult languages in which to become literate, and there is also no general awareness of such difficulties as phonologically non-unique morphological elements (e.g. the same sibilant suffixes to express both possessive and plural in most English nouns, the same final vowel for infinitive, second-person plural, and past participle in many French verbs).

6 A given language has a distinct market value that can be calculated by various objective measures. See the useful chapter on “The value of a language: factors of an economic profile of languages” in Coultas 1992.
underlay the volume was subtractive: the bilingual’s two languages were
said to compete—"metaphorically," said the editors—"for a finite amount
of memory and processing space"; the possibility of a full and richly de-
veloped bilingualism was acknowledged only by a single reference to "the
so-called balanced bilingual" (p. 2). There were no tempering statements
about the enrichment potential of bilingualism, nor was first-language
attrition, the official subject of the book, distinguished from convergence
phenomena. Attrition in language contact implies loss and incomple-
ateness, while convergence implies mutual influence. The latter can rea-
sonably be considered a normal manifestation of bilingualism, on both the
individual and the societal level, but it does not by any means constitute an
"unraveling," at least to my mind. It often represents the regional norm, in
fact, deviant only when matched against the standard language, and purely
in the abstract at that (since the actual performance of even those who
claim to be standard-language speakers usually diverges from book and
classroom norms).

The cumulative effect of the "ideology of contempt," of igno-
rance about the complexity and expressivity of indigenous languages, of
a belief in linguistic social Darwinism, and of a belief in the onerousness
of bi- or multilingualism converge to bear down most of the languages
spoken by populations without wealth or power. They are heavy weights
for small populations in particular to cast off, and few have so far been able
to do so.

In the most general terms, a linguistically distinctive population
which has come to have poor standing needs to discover or develop some
basis for increased self-regard in order to withstand pressures for ancestral-
language abandonment and shift to a dominant-group language. Several
possible sources of such self-regard can be identified, at least tentatively.
Rising prosperity, as an indicator of increasing economic success, can be
an effective counterpoise to the social disfavor that typically accompanies
a subsistence-level economy. Provided it does not burst suddenly upon a
population with no prior experience of it, prosperity can boost social self-
confidence while also providing the resources for institutional language-
maintenance efforts that might otherwise seem prohibitively expensive.

7 The history of the Utage tribe after sudden oil wealth illustrates some of the problems associated with
abrupt and unexpected wealth.

The Ayas Valley, in the Autonomous Aosta Valley Region within the Italian
Republic, moved in recent decades from an economy based on agriculture
and stock-rearing to one based on tourism. The resulting prosperity of
the region supports a trilingual pre-school program for children from 3 to
5. Despite the small size of the population served, five schools deliver a
carefully designed and executed program that provides support for local
Franco-provençal as well as for Italian and Standard French (Decime 1994).
A similar economic transition has changed the outlook for tiny Ladin,
spoken in three small and discontinuous districts in the South Tyrol region
of Italy (Markey 1988). The development of a booming tourist industry,
geared in good part to luxury-level skiing, has been the most conspicuous
change in local conditions. The seasonal nature of the tourist industry
and the fact that the tourists represent no single dominant language, plus
the isolation of the districts at other times of the year, perhaps operate to
safeguard the ancestral-language base, which has been strengthening in
recent decades.

Where prosperity grows less suddenly and dramatically, it may be
that its usefulness lies above all in the fostering of a middle class with the
social self-confidence to insist on traditional identity and heritage. Catalan
speakers, in a region with a strong economic base and a self-confident tra-
dition, emerged from the severe suppression of the Franco years and were
soon able to begin once again attracting new speakers to their language in
Castilian-dominated Spain (Woolard & Gahng 1990). 8

Wales is considerably less prosperous overall than Catalonia, the
Ayas Valley, or the Ladin districts of the South Tyrol. Within the ranks of
an established middle class, however, social self-confidence can seemingly
emerge despite economic weakness if educational achievement permits
marked social mobility. In nineteenth-century Wales in-migration of large
numbers of English coal-industry workers originally posed a severe threat
to the survival of Welsh. Yet in the longer run the coal industry helped to

8 Catalan can be considered a "small" language in
the context of Spain, since it is spoken by a much
smaller number of people than Spanish and is
found chiefly in a single region of the country.
By comparison with minority languages in many
other settings, however, it is extremely well
represented. Numbers as such form an uncertain
measure of linguistic security, of course; some of
the distinctly precarious languages of Central India
have over a million speakers, e.g. Kuru (Abbi
1995), and so did beleaguered Breton, in France,
as recently as 1726 (Timm 1973:289, citing Meillet
1928:380).
produce a middle class which in the twentieth century has provided much of the impetus for revitalization of Welsh. Kheif, studying the successful growth of Welsh-medium education, identified the “new middle class” in Wales as the chief factor in the turn-around (1980:77–78):

The current leaders of Welsh opinion are overwhelmingly sons and daughters of coal miners, agricultural workers, steel workers, shop keepers, and minor civil servants, but especially of coal miners . . . They are all Welsh-speaking and, in a small country such as Wales, know each other very well. Their Welshness sets them apart, for to have spoken Welsh at home, a generation ago, meant that the person by definition was working-class. They are very proud of their Welshness, of their ability to speak Welsh, of their ability to “live a full Welsh life”. They consider their knowledge of Welsh a badge of achievement, for it differentiates them from other middle-class people as well as working-class people who are English monoglots . . .

Sons and daughters of the new Welsh-speaking middle class are more self-assured, many informants remarked. Welsh-medium schools impart self-confidence to the new generation.

The speakers of Ladin, Catalan, and Welsh are themselves Europeans, of course, and as such they may have been at least conceptually less distant to begin with from envisioning their own linguistic success (and less distant, no less significantly, from outside investment capital and the like). Most small-language communities cannot realistically look to rapidly spurring prosperity to reinforce their standing, unfortunately.

Occasionally more accessible as a socially and psychologically invigorating factor may be progress towards political autonomy, preceding or accompanying the rise of a middle class and of a native intelligentsia. In Greenland, for example, after a period of intense Danicization that accompanied a drive toward modernization, reaction set in and pressure for greater autonomy resulted in Home Rule for Greenland in 1979. Prior to that year Greenlandic had been considered a threatened language, with considerable justification in view of the rise in the number of Danish monolinguals during the preceding quarter-century. Since that year Greenlandic has been supported and promoted to an increasing degree, and bilingual Greenlanders have increasingly replaced monolingual Danes in the top institutional and organizational positions (Langgaard 1992).

It would be difficult, or more likely impossible, to identify a precise cause-and-effect sequence in most of the cases mentioned so far, since the factors involved frequently intermesh. Rising prosperity and an emerging middle class often coincide. A native intelligentsia is likely to appear in conjunction with an emerging middle class, and any or all of these factors may either precede or accompany movement towards greater political autonomy.

While these factors appear to enhance the chances of ancestral-language maintenance, their absence need not doom a small language to rapid disappearance. The case of the Arizona Tewa, still in possession of their ancestral language even though long enrolled among the Hopi, suggests a different sort of counterpoise to the negative effects of European-derived linguistic ideologies. On the basis of long-term work among the Arizona Tewa, Kroskrity proposes that in the theocratic Pueblo societies, where political and religious authority are fused, ceremonial speech has a position analogous to that of the standard language in a nation-state. The highly regarded ceremonial speech variety called te’e hi:li ‘kiva talk’ is of critical importance to the Arizona Tewa, and the rigorous standards applied to its maintenance spill over into attitudes towards Arizona Tewa generally (Kroskrity 1995:37–39):

Their concern is with maintaining and delimiting a distinctive and appropriate linguistic variety, or vocabulary, for religious expression . . .
The strong sanctions against foreign expressions in ceremonial speech – violations of which are physically punished – are motivated not by the linguistic expression of xenophobia or extreme ethnocentrism but by the need for stylistic consistency in a highly conventionalized liturgical speech level. Similarly, the negative evaluation of code-mixing in everyday speech by members of the Arizona Tewa speech community does not reflect attitudes about these other languages but rather the functioning of ceremonial speech as a local model of linguistic prestige . . . just as ceremonial practitioners can neither mix linguistic codes nor use them outside of their circumscribed contexts, Tewa people should observe comparable compartmentalization of their various languages and linguistic levels in their everyday speech.

The Arizona Tewa have maintained their ancestral language for 300 years, despite enslavement within a Hopi environment, despite considerable intermarriage with the Hopi, and despite a small population base. There may well be a variety of elements in their success: they pride themselves on their skill at languages, for example, and they consider their bilingualism in Hopi, while the Hopi do not control Tewa, a form of cultural
victory (Kroskrity 1993:23, 218). The centrality of religious ceremony has been a factor in some other cases of unexpectedly sustained language maintenance in seemingly adverse circumstances, however (cf. Hohenthal & McCorkle 1955; Barber 1973), and a strong religious base certainly cannot be overlooked as a source of the psychosocial confidence necessary for language maintenance in the face of considerable social pressure for shift.

Despite the fact that peoples speaking a variety of small local languages have followed similar paths to a decrease in speaker numbers and to an eventual language shift, the path in question is neither inevitable nor perfectly predictable. Even the prospect of material well-being, for example, seductively associated with Westernization during the long period over which European (and more recently American) power has expanded, does not invariably lure a population away from its traditional culture and traditional language. Natives of Pulap Island in the Western Island group of the Carolines (Micronesia) have proved unusually resistant, during the half-century of US dominance in their region since World War II, to American individualistic and materialistic values, which they consider selfish and greedy. While modern opportunities for wage-earning work away from the home island have produced welcome material rewards for some Pulap Islanders, indigenous values have led to the sharing of those rewards among extended kin groups at home. Many traditional practices reflecting persisting-traditional values still prevail among the Pulape, not only on Pulap Island itself but also on Moen, the capital of Chuuk State, where land purchases by some Pulap Islanders in the 1950s have come to serve as a more centrally located and urbanized extension of Pulap Island:

The art of [traditional] navigation, production and exchange of local foods, respect behavior toward kin, and traditional dress are the major traits that Pulape invoke to conceptualize their culture, and this process appears in its most pronounced form on Moen. Pulape present these cultural characteristics as evidence of their worth in a context in which others are abandoning tradition.

9 Compare the Emenyo of New Guinea, who likewise consider bilingualism an accomplishment and feel superior to less frequently bilingual Dene-speaking neighbors in whose language they are commonly bilingual (Salisbury 1962:4). This is the antithesis of the widespread anglophone notion that bilingualism is damaging to the bilingual because the two languages inevitably compete for limited cognitive space.

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Navigating by traditional means is more difficult than navigation using modern techniques, and traditional food preparation is relatively slow and laborious. Traditional clothing permits body parts now normally covered elsewhere in the region to go uncovered, and respect behavior requires women to stoop in the presence of their older brothers, among other things. Pulapese cultural conservatism is overt and obvious, therefore, and is acknowledged by other islanders. By laying claim in clearly identifiable fashion to greater traditional "purity," the Pulapese present themselves as superior in a cultural sense, creatively compensating for a lesser material well-being. And as might be expected, given the other conservative Pulapese behaviors, Pulap Islanders on Moen, even the secondary-school pupils whose education on Moen is entirely in English, maintain the use of their Pulap dialect in the home setting (Flinn 1992:156).

The existence of resistant groups such as the Arizona Tewa and the Pulap Islanders (and of others as well, such as the mountain Kwaio of the Solomon Islands [Keessing 1992]) indicates that one of our particularly acute needs is more in-depth studies of linguistic and cultural persistence in small communities. Except in cases of great geographical or social isolation, the long-term maintenance of a small language implies not just the persistence of one language but the enduring coexistence of two or more. Currently we understand the motivating factors in language shift far better than we understand the psychosocial underpinnings of long-sustained language maintenance. We need to understand not just the staying power of the Arizona Tewa (illuminated both by Yava 1978 and by Kroskrity 1993), but the tolerance of the Hopi, who have permitted long-term Tewa-Hopi bilingualism in their midst while remaining largely without knowledge of Tewa themselves. In similar fashion, Moen natives apparently exert no pressure on the Pulap Islanders on Moen to abandon their somewhat archaic behaviors or to give up their home-island speech variety. Another case of seemingly unproblematic coexistence is to be found in the Circassians who fled to the Middle East in the nineteenth century, with 120 years of persistence in what is now Israel, and Israeli acceptance of them. They are reported to cultivate bi- and trilingualism as a matter of course and to show no signs of incipient language shift (Stern 1990).

10 There are other cases of great potential interest. English is said to be the language of all monetary rewards for the Kosaal of Texas, who number under 200. The children attend English-language
In an ironic turn of events, the excesses of nationalism itself may have begun to effect a change in thinking that could conceivably, if it were to catch hold, lead to an improved outlook for small-language communities submerged in, or under the control of, contemporary nation-states. Recent prime ministers of Ireland and the United Kingdom, recognizing that irreconcilable nationalist aspirations will never offer a basis for peaceful solutions to the problems of Northern Ireland, came forward with the proposal that what they term "multiple allegiances" be recognized. The Irish prime minister, in a talk before the National Press Club in Washington, DC (Bruton 1995), pointed out that land ownership is no longer the basis of real wealth in modern economies, so that discrete assignment of all land to mutually exclusive nations does not have the urgency it once had. So long as no flags are run up the pole (i.e. so long as certain traditional emblems of purely political allegiance are avoided), individuals with different sets of multiple allegiances should reasonably be able to co-exist in one region. He is so much persuaded of the power of this concept that he recommends it as a potential solution in other ethnically and linguistically complex regions of Europe such as Latvia and Catalonia.

Multiple allegiances in this sense might be seen as an extension into the sphere of political organization of the sociologist's status sets, the totality of all the statuses one occupies (not always entirely congruently) in one's social life. In the political sphere this suggests is to some extent "post-nationalist" and to that degree perhaps an escape hatch from the demands of mutually exclusive nationalisms. The fact that recognition of multiple allegiances is being recommended as a solution for otherwise irresolvable nationalist conflicts precisely in Europe could be especially helpful, since it is the concept of the nation-state coupled with its official standard language, developed in modern Europe and extended to the many once-colonial territories of European states, that has in modern times posed the keenest threat to both the identities and the languages of small communities. Outside the modern European sphere of interest the same problem of insistent single-language dominance coupled with hostility to

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"What we are trying to do in Ireland is to redefine the concept of nationality, so that it suits the realities of the 21st century, and isn't mired in the concepts that were the cause of so much war in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries" (Bruton 1995b).

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11 This is not to suggest that enforced use of a dominant-group language and intolerance of subordinate languages were unknown outside Europe, since that is clearly not the case. Heath and Laprade describe Inka policies designed to erase both the histories and the languages of conquered tribes, including "a program to spread their language, Quechua, and to prohibit use of the languages of subjugated tribes" (1982:215).
the survival of smaller indigenous languages. The emergence of government-
level initiatives to counter some of the negative aspects of nationalism (in
the form of the new “multiple allegiances” discussion), the stirrings of a
new legitimacy for small languages, and perhaps also the growing acknowl-
edgment in recent decades (in the United States at any rate) of the value
for the health of individual and planet of at least some non-Western, small-
society forms of religious or spiritual world-view, conceivably offer a small
window of opportunity to make the case for the wisdom of preserving lin-
guistic and cultural diversity.

Still, recent concerns about loss of linguistic and cultural diversity,
together with new recognition of the possibilities of multiple sociopolitical
allegiances and of the legitimacy of ethnic languages and of multilingual-
ism, come very late in the day for most small languages. Material well-being
has been intimately linked to the adoption of dominant languages for a very
long time, and the reality of that linkage is undeniable. It requires enormous
social and psychological self-confidence for any small group to insist on
the importance of ancestral-language retention. (Consider, for example, the
case of the English-monolingual speakers who can claim Tlingit ethnicity,
as discussed in Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, this volume.) Precisely that
sort of self-confidence is hard to come by in communities which have
suffered the penalties of an ideology of contempt over a long period.

Special problems can arise, furthermore, if language shift is already
well underway. Even in settings where remaining fluent speakers of the
ancestral language may sense that their culture is deeply bound up with
their language (and it is surely germane to the durability of Arizona Tewa
that its speakers frequently state “Our language is our history” [Kroskrity
1993:44]), it becomes impossible to insist on that linkage if a large part of
the social group that identities itself by the ancestral-language label no
longer speaks that language. In such cases, defining identity in terms of lan-
guage would define out of membership most of the younger people whose
retention is vital to continued existence as a group. And those without the
language will resist the linkage, if my experience in the Scottish Highlands
is any indication. I found that when I asked speakers of Scottish Gaelic
whether a knowledge of Gaelic was necessary to being a “true Highlander,”
they said it was; when I asked people of Highland birth and ancestry who
did not speak Gaelic the same question, they said it wasn’t. This is not
a surprising division of opinion, but it does greatly complicate the situ-
ation for small communities where ancestral-language loss is already well
advanced. The question of a linkage between a language and the culture it’s
associated with becomes so delicate a matter that it’s almost easier to insist
on the importance of language to heritage and identity in settings where
the ancestral language is entirely lost than in settings where it’s retained
by a relatively small number. Among the Echota Cherokee of Alabama,
for example, strong sentiment attaches across various age groups to the
Cherokee language and great longing for a lost heritage is expressed in con-
nection with the possibility of introducing it into selected Alabama schools
(Sabino 1994:5); but this outpouring of fervor is for a vanished language
that none of the Echota currently speaks.

Joshua Fishman points out that language “always exists in a cultural
matrix” and that the matrix rather than the language is the point at which
support is most needed (1989:399). He calls attention to the power of
“Zeitgeist trends that can contribute as much or even more to [language]
spread than language policy per se,” and to a momentum generated by
“mobility aspirations” and “the apparent stylishness of the pursuit of mo-
dernity itself” (1989:390). He recognizes (1989:399) that the staying power
of endangered languages “must be intimately tied to a thousand intimate or
small-scale network processes, processes too gratifying and rewarding to
surrender even if they do not quite amount to the pursuit of the higher
reaches of power and modernity.” Such rewards cannot be supplied from
the outside. They are to be had from within the social web of the commu-
nity itself or not at all. For this reason it is extraordinarily difficult for even
the most sympathetic outsiders to provide useful support for endangered
small languages, most especially for non-European small languages within
a Euro-American sphere of influence. Moral support and technical expert-
tise, including linguistic expertise, can and should be offered, certainly, but
acceptance or rejection will necessarily lie with individual communities.
Even in the event of acceptance, effective leadership can only come from
inside the community.

One role that knowledgeable outsiders have sometimes usefully
played is that of information-disseminator and consciousness-raiser, help-
ing to make a wider public aware of the looming threats to a local language’s
survival. This process has only recently begun on a scale more appropriate
to the size of the problem, however, and time has grown desperately short
for many local languages. Having waited too long before undertaking to rally
support for threatened languages, we may find ourselves eulogizing extinct
languages whose living uniqueness we had hoped instead to celebrate.