



## A Response to Ladefoged's Other View of Endangered Languages

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## DISCUSSION NOTE

### A response to Ladefoged's other view of endangered languages\*

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Peter Ladefoged's discussion note in *Language* 68 (December, 1992:809–11), 'Another view of endangered languages', responds in a general way to the 'Endangered languages' papers of Ken Hale, Michael Krauss, Lucille Watahomigie & Akira Yamamoto, Colette Craig, LaVerne Masayesva Jeanne, and Nora England in *Language* 68 (March, 1992:1–42). In what follows I would like to respond in a specific way to some of the views put forth in Ladefoged's discussion note. I base my comments purely on Ladefoged's own positions, without reference to the papers he was responding to, since it is his arguments which raise the issues I would like to take up.

1. 'We must be wary of arguments based on political considerations' (Ladefoged, p. 810).

The implication is that apolitical positions can be found and adopted. Scientists of many stripes like to consider their undertakings apolitical and their professional activities objective and impartial. In actuality, linguistic salvage work which consists solely of 'record[ing] for posterity' certain structural features of a threatened small language is inevitably a political act, just as any other act touching that language would be. It is neither more nor less political to do something 'which might seem, at least superficially, to aid in [tribalism's] preservation' (809) than it is to acquiesce in the efforts of an African nation-state (he instances Tanzania) to 'striv[e] for unity'. The one is opposed by a national government, the other is sanctioned by it, but each is a political act. Nation-states in Africa are notoriously the creatures of recent and arbitrary demarcation by outsiders to the region. Peoples who speak closely related forms of the same language often spill across the borders of these modern nation-states, while peoples who speak quite different languages may be contained within them. The borders that keep the former apart and the latter together were not created by anything resembling the self-determination that western democracies promote, and maintenance of those boundaries is by no means always in line with the aspirations of some populations within them. Respecting the identity of nation-states like Tanzania may well be more politic and safer than respecting the ethnic identity of a tribal group, but it is not inherently less political.

I do not advocate that linguists foment ethnic breakaways or join in them, any more than Ladefoged advocates that they join in genocide or abet repression. But before we accord automatic priority to the nation-state, we should take note of a growing contemporary recognition of 'failed nation-states' and

\* I am indebted to Suzanne Romaine for helpful criticisms of the first draft of this discussion note. The final form of the note represents my opinions alone.

of 'submerged nations'. And we should acknowledge, too, that there are national governments which act murderously towards some of their inhabitants (often especially towards minority groups), so that it could be thoroughly irresponsible to 'do anything which might seem, at least superficially, to aid' in their oppressions. Nationalism is not inherently good; nor is tribalism inherently bad. For that matter, what is promoted as the national language is often the mother tongue of a particular tribe which, by accident of timing and geography, has gained political ascendancy.

The point is simply that one's fieldwork, however antiseptic it may try to be, inevitably has political overtones. If there is little overt politicization in the region, the fieldworker may be able to ignore those overtones. If there is considerable politicization, s/he cannot usually contrive to do so.

2. '[The Toda] have accepted that, in their view, the cost of doing this [i.e. becoming part of modern India] is giving up the use of their language in their daily life. Surely, this is a view to which they are entitled, and it would not be the action of a responsible linguist to persuade them to do otherwise' (Ladefoged, p. 810).

If there is any one thing that speakers of seriously threatened languages have in common, it is likely to be low status within the region where they live. Ladefoged reports on young Toda people who want 'to be part of a modern India' and on a Dahalo speaker who is 'proud that his sons had been to school' and smiled when he acknowledged that they 'speak only Swahili'. In the same vein, I watched a Gaelic-language revivalist in temporary local residence arouse intense discomfort and even hostility among East Sutherland Scottish Gaelic speakers who wanted nothing more than to be inconspicuous. They were a severely stigmatized subgroup in their part of Scotland, and I understood (and even to some extent shared) their discomfort. Writing about the impending death of East Sutherland Gaelic, I made the following statement that touches on the issue raised by Ladefoged (1981:72):

'One can regret, and bitterly, the loss of this unique local dialect of Gaelic. To anyone who cherishes the singular riches of the Celtic cultural heritage preserved in the Gaelic language, it must seem a pity, and an unnecessary and wasteful loss, that Britain has not known how to accommodate its cultural minorities. But given the social, economic, and linguistic climate of eastern Sutherland in the early decades of the twentieth century, it is surely fortunate that after the collapse of the east coast fisheries it proved possible for the fisherfolk to merge into the general population as they did. For a stigmatized group, the alternatives are likely to be even worse than loss of identity and language.'

Even so, I would answer Ladefoged's rhetorical question about the smiling Dahalo speaker, 'Who am I to say that he was wrong?' (811), by noting that the Gaelic-speaking East Sutherland fisherfolk have in one sense already been proven 'wrong', in that some of the youngest members of their own kin circles have begun to berate them for choosing not to transmit the ancestral language and so allowing it to die.

Third-generation pursuit of an ancestral language is a phenomenon with a fairly obvious social basis. The generation who do not transmit an ethnic language are usually actively in search of a social betterment that they believe

they can only achieve by abandoning, among other identifying behaviors, a stigmatizing language. The first generation secure as to social position is often also the first generation to yearn after the lost language, which by their time is no longer regarded as particularly stigmatizing. Some of these descendants see an ethnolinguistic heritage which eluded them and react to their loss, sadly or even resentfully. This is so widespread and recurrent a response to ancestral-language loss as to be something of a cliché among immigrant-descended groups. In other populations, rising consciousness of cultural loss resulting from a colonial past or other historically disfavoring circumstances produces similar results among modern-day descendants.

It's unlikely that linguists can ever persuade a group either to give up or not to give up 'the use of their language in their daily life' (810). Such behaviors come as the result of a confluence of social, economic, and political factors, not as a result of the persuasive powers of linguists. Reporting only on the abandonment phase of a language within a social group can obscure a longer-term dynamic, however, by overlooking reacquisition efforts on the part of members of a later generation within some social settings.

3. 'One can be a responsible linguist and yet regard the loss of a particular language, or even a whole group of languages, as far from a "catastrophic destruction"' (Ladefoged, p. 810).

Presumably linguists study language because language is an interesting human phenomenon; presumably they collectively study all human languages, rather than only one or two, because the diversities and commonalities are interesting and revealing. Ladefoged speaks appreciatively of the funding which allows the UCLA researchers to 'try to record for posterity the phonetic structures of some of the languages that will not be around much longer' (810); the implications are that there is something worth recording in these various languages and that posterity will be interested and grateful to have the record.

Phonetic structures, it must be noted, are among the more readily recordable aspects of language. Specialists in the ethnography of speaking, verbal art, pragmatics, discourse analysis, linguistic variation, language change, and various other subfields of linguistics cannot often expect to achieve records adequate for their purposes in short time periods. I spent parts of 15 years studying East Sutherland Gaelic in the field, and when I left off field studies it was not because I had accomplished all the work I thought was valuable and important, but only because health problems ruled out further fieldwork for me.

As it happens, all members of the Celtic language family, to which East Sutherland Gaelic belongs, are in the threatened category, with only Welsh given by some experts a fair chance of long-term survival. In view of what East Sutherland Gaelic has taught me, not to mention what the Celtic languages taken all together have offered to generations of linguists within a variety of specializations, I can subscribe to sentiments akin to the 'catastrophic destruction' camp rather easily, whether or not I would choose precisely that phraseology.

If a fifth, say, of all the buildings in the world were threatened with destruc-

tion, architects might well speak of a catastrophic destruction, even though more buildings might be built in future. If a quarter of all the folk tales in the world disappeared, folklorists might speak with some justification of a catastrophic loss, even though more folk tales might yet come into being. Languages not only reveal a great deal of human history that is often otherwise unrecoverable, in their genetic affiliations and in the evidence of culture contact that they contain, but they also carry truly vast cultural content, only a part of which is typically passed over into another language in the process of language shift. Just how many of humankind's languages are seriously threatened at present may be disputed, but there seems little doubt that the number of threatened languages is very large. Just what proportion of humankind's languages must disappear before the phrase 'catastrophic destruction' is warranted may also be a matter of dispute. Yet it seems a defensible intellectual as well as emotional position to hold that each loss in linguistic diversity is a diminution in an unusually powerful expression of human cultural life, given the nature of language. And it seems clear that whatever information about a fading language can be salvaged for posterity by assiduous short-term fieldwork will be small compared to the information that is lost. For each satisfied phonetician there will be a disappointed investigator interested in the ethnography of speaking, verbal art, etc.

Loss of a human language is not like loss of an animal species, since languages can be recorded and can be revived on the basis of that record (however rarely this may actually happen), whereas lost animal genes are unrecoverable. But loss of a human language is not like loss of a pottery-making technology, either, since reinvention of the same form is far more feasible in pottery-making than in language and since the scope of the loss is far greater in the case of language, encompassing as it does a much larger and more central part of people's daily and lifetime activity.

4. 'In this changing world, the task of the linguist is to lay out the facts concerning a given linguistic situation' (Ladefoged, p. 811).

This assumes for a start that the facts are readily discernible, which is not necessarily so. However, the facts about a language structure are likely to be a good deal more discernible than the facts about a linguistic 'situation'. In speaking of having dealt with 'SOME of the MAJOR languages spoken in Uganda' (emphasis added) in the study he recommends as a model (811), Ladefoged suggests a linguistic situation more complex than the research he refers to attempted to encompass. He also does not say how the social and historical contexts of 'the facts' laid out by the linguist are to be dealt with (one takes a political stance in either supplying them or not supplying them), but apart from this difficulty there is another. It is that the linguist cannot enter the threatened-language equation without becoming a factor in it. S/he may try to minimize the size of that factor, as Ladefoged appears to advocate, or s/he may try to maximize it by taking an explicit position pro or con whatever native speakers may be doing or thinking of doing and whatever a government may be doing or planning to do. The latter is riskier in practical terms, since the

government of the nation-state in which the threatened language exists may take exception to an explicit position on the part of the linguist, and this might make it difficult to undertake further or other descriptive efforts. But the former can be morally difficult for a linguist who finds government policies toward minority peoples repugnant or perhaps even criminal.

There are difficult ethical issues touched on only sideways in Ladefoged's note, not directly confronted. In the final paragraph he notes that his Ugandan research summarized all of the data gathered 'so that the government could assess the linguistic situation' (811). He makes a point of the fact that this effort took place 'immediately before the time of Idi Amin' and under a '(more or less) duly elected government'. Would he advocate the same task for a linguistic research team under Amin himself, or under a government that ruled as the result of a coup? The unacknowledged ethical issues implicit in this paragraph make the 'task of the linguist' in 'this changing world' considerably more complex than Ladefoged suggests.

All linguists are likely to agree on the importance of the descriptive task that Ladefoged as well as Hale, Krauss, Watahomigie, Yamamoto, Craig, Masayeva Jeanne, and England participate in. It's within the realm of possibility that at some point in the past the world's languages experienced a die-off of proportions equal to those of the die-off confronting them now, but the rather young academic discipline of Linguistics certainly has not confronted extinctions on this scale. There can be room for disagreement about the degree to which the salvage enterprise is political, about the appropriate latitude of the documentation task, and about the professional and personal resonance of the endangerment situation for linguists. But if there is an issue on which linguists' advocacy positions are worth hearing, it might legitimately be taken to be this one of how to respond to the large-scale language endangerment situation. The manifestations of the phenomenon linguists devote their lives to studying seem certain to be reduced by a very substantial number, and that may be reason enough to encourage the airing of opinions as well as the writing of grant proposals. I hope both will proceed energetically.

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