The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages

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Speakers and communities

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3.1   Introduction

We take it as a given that all fieldwork on an endangered language starts and develops thanks to some of its speakers. In the midst of a relative explosion of publications both on (linguistic) fieldwork and on endangered languages, it is therefore worth reminding ourselves that speakers are indeed the source, not to say the heart and soul of it all (see also Dobrin and Berson, Chapter 10).

Speakers are mentioned in the literature on fieldwork, e.g. in university textbooks used for linguistic fieldwork methodology courses (see the classic Samarin 1967, or the more recent Crowley 2007, and Bowern 2008). One can also find in Newman and Ratliff (2001a) a rich collection of portraits of speakers who have worked with linguists around the world. The topic has also been considered in discussions of FIELDWORK FRAMEWORKS, in terms of the power relations that hold between the researcher and the researched, taken as individuals or as communities (Cameron *et al.* 1993a, Craig 1993, Grinevald 1997).

But for all their centrality to the enterprise of language description, documentation and revitalization of endangered languages, relatively little research has been done so far on the great variety of speakers encountered in situations of language endangerment, and even less on what this variety means in terms of how to carry out fieldwork in such contexts. Yet, whenever specialists of fieldwork on endangered languages have paid attention to it, they have all recognized, on one hand, this great variety of speakers, and on the other, major profiles of speakers typical of such situations for particular endangered languages. The first to address the issue was Nancy Dorian, on the basis of her work on a dialect of Scottish Gaelic (Dorian 1977, 1981). Similar profiles of speakers

were identified later in various other very different field situations, such as in the Rama language in Nicaragua (Craig 1992a, Grinevald 2007) in Central America, and in the Francoprovençal-speaking area in France (Bert 2001; 2009). The typology of speakers of endangered languages presented below is partly based on a comparison of these three field experiences, and on extensive discussions among these three linguists and with many colleagues.

Another essential feature of situations of endangered languages, beyond the great variety of types of speakers, is the fact that the total number of individual speakers does not comprise a linguistic community in the traditional sense of the term. Common features in situations of language endangerment include the fact that speakers are often neither readily identifiable nor easily accounted for, and also that last speakers (see below) might be very isolated and not even be known to be speakers. In the end, establishing where the boundaries of the community might lie depends in large part on awareness of the level of vitality of the language, combined with the level of mobilization of speakers and non-speakers on its behalf.

3.2   Towards a typology of speakers of endangered languages

There is typically a great variety of speakers in any linguistic community, but this section addresses the issue of what makes endangered language speakers different, and why it should matter to be aware of this great diversity when working on the description, documentation or revitalization of endangered languages. After considering the specificities of this issue (3.2.1), and the multiple variables needed to analyse the variety (3.2.2), a preliminary typology of speakers will be presented (3.2.3). This typology will then be projected into a dynamic dimension in order to highlight how speakers can be recategorized over time (3.2.4). By way of conclusion, the last section considers which types of speakers are best suited for which particular tasks in relation to projects on endangered languages (3.2.5).

3.2.1   The great variety of speakers of endangered languages

In all societies, including those using major literate dominant languages, as well as those using minority languages (which may have literacy and/ or oral traditions), there are always some people who are really good with language and others who are less so. People can be more or less aware of their language, curious about it, playful with it, or indifferent to it. There are many types of speakers with particular relations to any language, such as second-language learners and foreign-language speakers,

but also speakers displaying signs of language attrition (for instance, because of emigration and exile, or for medical reasons; see Palosaari and Campbell, Chapter 6). So one could ask what is special about the claimed great variety of speakers of endangered languages.

There are two basic differences between the range of speakers of endangered and non-endangered languages. One is that, as the level of vitality of a language decreases, the proportion of supposedly marginal types of speakers will become more prevalent, perhaps rising eventually to become the bulk of the population of speakers. In this case, there may also be many varieties of second-language learners or speakers, as well as many speakers at different stages of language attrition. A second characteristic is that the phenomenon of language loss gives rise to some types of speakers that are specific to those circumstances, not so much in terms of their levels of knowledge of the language, but more in terms of sociopsychological traits that sometimes create unexpected interactions.

3.2.2   Elements of a typology of speakers of endangered languages

It will be argued below that beyond the range of speakers of endangered languages with their unique individual linguistic characteristics, some distinct PROFILES of speakers can be identified. The pioneering work of Dorian (1977, 1981) offered an initial typology that introduced the notion of SEMI-SPEAKER, now considered emblematic of language endangerment situations. The model was extended by Dressler (1981) and Campbell and Muntzel (1989), who added sociolinguistic variables in order to introduce another type of speaker typical of endangered language situations, the REMEMBERER. Reviews of early proposals for typologies of endangered language speakers can be found in Grinevald (1997) and Tsunoda (2005). What follows is a proposal for a more complex multidimensional and dynamic model that integrates a number of new parameters, and cross-tabulates them to identify with more precision a number of prototypes of speakers of endangered languages, some previously established in the literature and others not. The precision of the parameters and their various combinations allows also the identification of an infinite variation of more or less marginal exemplars that can be associated with those major categories.

The parameters form four distinct clusters:

1. The language competence cluster
    This first cluster is anchored in the major parameter of LANGUAGE COMPETENCE of the individual speaker, considered to be more or less proficient, with all degrees observed between the extremes of mastery of the endangered language to those with very little knowledge

of it.[1] The proposal here is to link this level of competence to what accounts for it, by considering in addition both the LEVEL OF ACQUISITION ATTAINED and the possible DEGREE OF INDIVIDUAL LOSS of the language. The association of the knowledge parameter with these two parameters yields three major types of speakers: FLUENT SPEAKERS (full acquisition and no loss), SEMI-SPEAKERS (partial acquisition and possible loss), and so-called TERMINAL SPEAKERS (either limited acquisition or acquisition but advanced loss).

2. The sociolinguistic cluster: exposure to language versus vitality of language at time of acquisition

   A second cluster of parameters deals with factors that situate the individual speakers within particular endangered language communities at a particular time and at a particular phase in the process of decline of the language. This is important to take into account since different types of speakers, in varying proportions, will be found at different societal stages of language endangerment. The sociolinguistic factor of the LEVEL OF VITALITY OF THE ENDANGERED LANGUAGE (see Grenoble, chapter 2) must therefore be cross-tabulated with the DATE OF BIRTH OF THE INDIVIDUAL SPEAKER. Whether the language was endangered, very endangered or extremely endangered when the speaker was born certainly determines how much exposure to the language was possible, and what opportunities were available to learn and use it, particularly at the crucial early period of language acquisition. This accounts for the large spectrum of semi-speakers, particularly numerous at advanced stages of language shift.

3. Performance cluster: use and attitude

   The third cluster of parameters takes into account the relation of the individual speaker to the endangered language community. It requires assessing the LEVEL OF USE of the language (constrained of course if the process of endangerment is very advanced, as just considered) and the ATTITUDES of the individual speaker toward the language, which is influenced of course by general attitudes toward the language (see Spolsky, Chapter 8). It is obvious that both use and attitude will have an impact on the level of competence considered in the first cluster of parameters, while competence of course will also constrain usage and influence attitude. Those parameters will distinguish between latent and active speakers, and different types of more or less RUSTY speakers.

4. Self-evaluation of speakers and linguistic insecurity

   The final major parameter has a psycholinguistic nature, linked to the complex process of self-evaluation by speakers. One of the essential traits of many speakers of endangered languages is a profound sense of LINGUISTIC INSECURITY that can colour interactions in unexpected ways. This insecurity can extend to total denial of any knowledge of the language, in spite of proof to the contrary. A particular

type of speaker has been identified around this extreme phenomenon of self-denial, that of the GHOST speaker. While this situation of under-evaluation is more common, one also needs to be aware of over-evaluation of competence in the case of certain speakers, because this self-confidence can easily be deflated in the course of interaction with a linguist and become a source of great discomfort.

It is therefore proposed that, in order to establish common profiles of speakers of endangered languages, one would need to handle a number of parameters of different natures and consider their interrelations.

3.2.3 A basic typology of speakers of endangered languages[2]

In this section seven types of speakers considered to be typical of situations of language endangerment will be identified. We note in passing that the terminology found so far in the literature and reported here is still rather controversial, as will be discussed in Section 3.4.1. The first three major types, namely FLUENT SPEAKERS, SEMI-SPEAKERS and TERMINAL SPEAKERS, are well known. The category of REMEMBERERS is less well defined but widely acknowledged, even if still subject to discussion. Less recognized are the categories of GHOST SPEAKERS, found in situations of advanced language loss, and of NEO-SPEAKERS emerging through language revitalization programmes. Finally, some remarks will be made about the partly mythological category of LAST SPEAKERS.

3.2.3.1 Fluent speakers

This first category constitutes the type of speakers most sought after by linguists wishing to carry out research on the language. They have sometimes been referred to as TRADITIONAL SPEAKERS due to their typically being the most conservative speakers in relation to others, who may have lower proficiency. But this does not necessarily mean that theirs is the most traditional type of speech, if it can be compared to older records of the language. A trait of these fluent speakers is that they have usually had and may still have conversation partners in the language. As the degree of language loss advances, there may in fact be very few of those fluent speakers left, until there are no more.

Dorian (1981) introduced a distinction between two subcategories, of OLD FLUENT SPEAKERS versus YOUNG FLUENT SPEAKERS. Young fluent speakers would be those fluent in the endangered language, but speaking it in a somewhat modified form compared to old fluent speakers, as the result of the process of LANGUAGE OBSOLESCENCE (see Palosaari and Campbell, Chapter 6). Typically, but not always, these new forms of language spoken by the young fluent speakers are not rejected by the old fluent speakers as being deviant; however, different individuals and communities show differing ideologies in this regard (with some individuals

and groups showing an ideology of LINGUISTIC PURISM while others have an ideology that is more accepting of difference and change).

In the situation originally described by Dorian in Gaelic-speaking Scotland, the labels YOUNG and OLD corresponded to real age differences, between two generations of speakers. Although the link between age and level of proficiency generally holds in situations of more advanced language loss than the one she described, it will happen at some point that the so-called young fluent type become older, and will then represent the most fluent remaining speakers.

3.2.3.2   Semi-speakers

The category of semi-speakers, introduced by Dorian, is the most emblematic of situations of language endangerment. It is a large category which includes all members of the community with appropriate receptive skills in the language, but varying levels of productive skills. It can include speakers with relatively high fluency, especially in routine contexts such as casual conversations. This category also includes speakers with limited language knowledge but who are socially integrated into the endangered language community and can interact competently in most situations, possibly using minimal language forms but deploying them in socioculturally appropriate ways. In our experience, it is generally the case that, unlike speakers in the previous category, the semi-speakers have not had and do not have regular conversation partners in the endangered language, and operate most of their sociolinguistic lives in the dominant language rather than the endangered language.

It is characteristic of the speech of semi-speakers that it contains more modified forms than the speech of young fluent speakers, and that some of those modified forms are considered as mistakes by fluent speakers. It is worth noting that it is from this generally larger semi-speaker group that some of the most involved activists for language revitalization emerge (see Hinton, Chapter 15).

3.2.3.3   Terminal speakers

This is a term that is found in the literature, although its negative connotations make it controversial. Some have suggested the term PARTIAL is preferable, although this would not distinguish them qualitatively from semi-speakers. Terminal speakers are those with some passive knowledge of the language and very limited productive skills, sometimes reduced to frozen fixed expressions. This very limited knowledge can be the result of either very partial acquisition of the endangered language (say, overhearing it spoken irregularly by grandparents to each other), or of an advanced level of attrition in someone who might have been a more fluent speaker in childhood.

These first three types, identified primarily on the basis of level of competence, need to be considered from two perspectives. One is that of

the level of vitality of the language, according to which the proportion of speakers of each type will vary. For instance, at the time a linguist encounters the situation, the language may be so endangered that there are no more old fluent speakers and the oldest speakers left are in fact young fluent or even semi-speakers. The second is that, according to the types of speakers available, discussions of standardization and revitalization will often involve choosing between different forms of speech to be taught to learners: perhaps those of older fluent or younger fluent speakers, but sometimes even those used by semi-speakers. The identification of the next categories relies on parameters of a sociolinguistic nature, although there is overlap at competence level with the types presented above.

3.2.3.4   Rememberers

In order to describe this type of speaker, we introduce the parameters of acquisition and loss. Speakers with limited knowledge of the endangered language due to attrition can be associated with the categories of semi-speaker or terminal speaker. Their language attrition is sometimes due to traumatic circumstances (such as ethnic massacres of the kind still retold in parts of the Americas) that have forced them to hide their knowledge of the language. The term 'rememberer' evokes the possibility that such speakers may regain or reacquire some partial active use of the language. They could be inhibited at first, or unwilling to participate, but they might join a documentation and/or revitalization project at a later point. They should not be overlooked in fieldwork since they can always help reconstitute or even reinvent a sense of community at organized gatherings and contribute to efforts at language revitalization.

3.2.3.5   Ghost speakers

Ghost speakers are those who conspicuously deny any knowledge of the endangered language in spite of evidence that they do have some level of competence. This denial is the manifestation of a strong negative attitude toward the language and a deep rejection of any identification with it, in particular in the eyes of outsiders. This type of (non-)speaker would seem to be characteristic of certain contexts of language endangerment, in particular where a much denigrated regional language is overpowered by a highly standardized and valued national language, as happens with regional languages of France.[3] To the extent that one cannot evaluate their language proficiency, it seems difficult to assign them to any of the fluent speaker, semi-speaker or terminal-speaker categories.

3.2.3.6   Neo-speakers

This type of speaker has not been referenced in the literature yet, but they are becoming central to language revitalization, whose aim is partly to produce this kind of speaker.

Neo-speakers are learners of endangered languages in the context of revitalization programmes and activities. The level of language competence achieved by these new speakers depends of course on the abilities of the individuals, and can correspond broadly to the different levels within the semi-speaker category, from low to higher fluency. Some exceptionally gifted new speakers could perhaps even reach the level of a young fluent speaker. These neo-speakers can be distinguished from other types in that the category may include outsiders to the language community. Also, their positive attitudes towards the endangered language and their particular vision of the endangered language community, precisely as a community, propels them into conscious efforts to learn it. It is also important to note the kinds of language forms they are being taught. The language could be at an advanced level of language endangerment already, with its use limited to somewhat artificial settings and the forms taught showing definite signs of language obsolescence (see Hinton, Chapter 15, and Hinton and Hale 2001).

3.2.3.7 Last speakers

Finally, we should consider one category widely reported in the press, and probably best known to the general public: the category of so-called last speaker. We believe that, interestingly, this type does not belong to a typology of speakers of endangered languages, but rather to another realm, one of social and political status, with a touch of myth. It nevertheless catches the imagination of non-specialists and has become a point of entry into the phenomenon of language endangerment.[4] It is a category which seems to be assigned by a community to a specific individual, although it can also be self-attributed. In any case, being the last speaker may be an important public and social role.[5] They are often strong personalities, who might denigrate the speech of others identified by outsiders or linguists as speakers (of one type or another), or even conceal the existence of other speakers (see Evans 2001 for discussion). And while the person fulfilling the role of last speaker is generally considered to be a traditional old fluent speaker, especially by the community, linguists may consider him or her to be a young fluent speaker, or a semi-speaker, or a rememberer, or even, at the end of the process of language loss, as a very partial terminal speaker.

3.2.4 Dynamics of the typology of speakers

An important aspect of situations of language endangerment is their dynamics, as much at the level of the individual speakers as at community level. We identify three types of dynamic going on simultaneously:

1. **steady loss of vitality of the language.** This manifests itself through the death of the speakers themselves, but also through

attrition of the competence of remaining speakers, due to increasing lack of use over time, and of course due to the natural aging process producing language limitations.

2. **increasing proficiency of speakers.** For instance, rememberers can sometimes demonstrate partial recovery of their fluency in an endangered language through renewed contact with more fluent speakers and/or participation in language-related activities. Semi-speakers can also display low fluency at first, and then become more fluent through activities in language programmes and/or contact with more proficient speakers. Sometimes their progress in handling the language is quite dramatic, to the point that some may become leaders in revitalization programmes. This obviously also includes non-speakers who become neo-speakers, reaching varying levels of fluency.[6]

3. **recategorization of speakers.** The categorization of certain speakers may need to be readjusted over time as their level of proficiency is reassessed. This can be the case of individuals originally considered non-speakers who turn out to have more knowledge than estimated, either because they hid their competence or because the opportunity never arose for them to claim they had any proficiency. Another possible surprise may occur with speakers who are claimed to be (good) speakers but who are found in the course of fieldwork not to know as much as they or others claimed, or perhaps believed they knew.

3.2.5 Speakers of and projects on endangered languages

By way of conclusion of our discussion about the diversity of endangered language speakers, we will consider how the different types of projects carried out on endangered languages can tap into this great variety of speakers, to make the best of the knowledge and goodwill available. Where resources are scarce, particularly in situations of advanced language demise, it becomes essential to look for all possible ways to work with all types of speakers, by adapting methodologies and goals to suit the contexts best.

Linguists working on undescribed or under-described languages have to work with speakers in order to gather documentation of all types of speech events (see Woodbury, Chapter 9), establish the grammatical structure of the language, produce dictionaries (see Mosel, Chapter 17), and so on. Some linguists dream of and search for native speakers who are so-called NATURAL LINGUISTS, that is, speakers who are metalinguistically aware and interested in the form and function of their language. Although there are usually a few such people in any given speech community, there might be fewer for an endangered language simply because there are fewer speakers of any type. Interestingly, many

linguists have observed that among last speakers there are often such natural linguists, possibly because they have consciously kept their language alive in their own minds or through using it with themselves[7], who are very attached to and intimate with it. It is often the case that such people welcome linguists wishing to carry out research on their language, and find great satisfaction in sharing their knowledge.[8]

Linguists also often look for good storytellers but again this is a talent that is not as widespread as might be thought; experts with extensive knowledge of vocabulary and an encyclopaedic approach to lexical studies are also quite rare. Speakers with such talents may be few in advanced stages of language loss. But one should not overlook semi-speakers, or even rememberers, because some may preserve memories of aspects of the language (and the culture) forgotten or abandoned by more fluent speakers.

Projects on endangered languages, particularly documentation projects, also rely on individuals who may be limited speakers themselves but who take on a key role as go-between and facilitator. They are very important as brokers between linguists and insecure or hidden speakers, or older native speakers who might be afraid of strangers. They can organize gatherings and explain the work to be done. And one should never forget interested young people from the community, who are most likely to be better learners of new technologies and who could become field assistants, even if they are only partial speakers or learners.

For projects oriented toward revitalization, the participation of language activists becomes essential. Language activists from within the community are often semi-speakers, aware of and concerned about the demise of the language (Hinton, Chapter 15). They are likely to have more formal education than others, maybe because they were not raised in traditional environments. Thus they might be able to handle new technologies or be prepared to be trained in them (see Holton, Chapter 19, on this point).

3.3   On endangered language communities

The nature of endangered language communities will be addressed first by considering them through the lens of their geographic locations and configurations (3.3.1). It will also be considered from the perspective of different concepts of LANGUAGE and SPEECH COMMUNITIES, in order to show how both concepts are intricately intertwined in endangered language communities (3.3.2). Finally, the issue of language endangerment in communities will be approached from the perspective of the evolution of their level of consciousness and their evolving attitudes, in the context of recently developed discourse about the preservation of worldwide biocultural diversity (3.3.3).

3.3.1   Geographical/field perspectives on endangered language communities

Here we consider the practical fieldwork issue of where a particular ENDANGERED LANGUAGE COMMUNITY can be located. Possibilities range from nomadic groups situated in deserts or tropical forests, some of whom may also live in sedentary settlements, to identifiable communities in old settlements on ancestral lands or on reservations they have been moved to. It is becoming increasingly frequent also to find more diffuse communities in urban centres as a result of emigration from traditional locations (Harbert, Chapter 20).

Endangered language communities can be located in well-defined territories, in a particular village, or in a number of settlements. One type of such a territory is the reservation system (of the type found in the USA), where different communities have generally been gathered through forced movement and settlement. In this case, the origin of the settlements and the nature of their current administrative organization often constrain the types of relations outsiders may have with speakers (see below). In many parts of the world today endangered language communities are pressing legal demands for the recognition of their ancestral territories.[9]

Endangered language communities are sometimes located in small isolated villages. These communities are almost always multilingual, and the speaker population is more or less identifiable, depending on the level of endangerment and of consciousness of this endangerment (see below). In the case of village communities, the level of endangerment needs to be assessed for each and every one of the settlements, since local history may result in very different situations.

Importantly, from a geographic point of view, endangered language communities are often found in transnational territories, for two major reasons. One is that they often have survived better away from urban centres of colonization, often near borders, and, second, because political borders were often drawn arbitrarily, cutting through ancestral territories. This is a common feature for Amazonian indigenous language communities, for instance (Queixalos and Renault-Lescure 2000), who may be split across several countries.

Another major trait of endangered language communities is their mobility, through migration and urbanization within a country as well as through transnational migrations, both as a result of economic hardship and persecution and wars (Harbert, Chapter 20). The phenomenon of rural exodus toward urban centres generally involves regrouping of the newly urbanized population, with some contact maintained with the home base and speakers left at home. This is a common situation for African and Native American communities. Sometimes the majority of an endangered language population can actually have become urbanized. Some home villages are practically drained of their workforce and a large proportion of the population (re)forms a new community

in some faraway country. There are even cases where the language survives better in such diaspora communities than back home (as a result of increased wealth, changed attitudes and/or ideologies, and the influence of the attitudes and ideologies of the surrounding communities). Today new technologies, which permit rapid communication with the home base, also change the conditions of use of the language while facilitating language maintenance at a distance (see Holton, Chapter 19, and Moriarty, Chapter 22).

Endangered language communities thus take many shapes and can be found in many different configurations. They are not always small communities isolated in the jungle as much media coverage tends to project. When not in well-defined territories, they can be hard to locate and hard to reach. In the case of urbanization, they may be hard to identify.

3.3.2   Endangered language(s) and 'communities' of speakers

The two concepts of LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES and SPEECH COMMUNITIES will be reviewed first in order to show how endangered language communities are found at their intersection.

3.3.2.1   Language communities

These consist of communities of speakers of the 'same' language (leaving aside the complexities of the concept of 'language' itself; see Spolsky, Chapter 8). The language communities of the largest languages of the world (see the list of major languages in Austin 2008a), are languages with a high level of recognition, through extensive processes of standardization, with written norms that serve as common reference. These languages are usually taught and reinforced through formal education. At the opposite end of the continuum, endangered languages are, in essence, minority languages, many of which are not yet identified as languages, may have no name, no written tradition, and no standardization.

3.3.2.2   Speech communities

In contrast, speech communities are sociolinguistic entities rather than purely linguistic ones (see also Michael, Chapter 7). It is not necessary that all the members of a speech community speak the same way, or even have the same language. As a matter of fact, monolingual communities are more the exception than the rule around the world. Speech communities are communities of speakers in regular contact, who follow more or less established rules of communication dictating which language to speak to whom, when and where. Speech communities are commonly multilingual communities with complex language-contact situations, with well-established diglossic dynamics, and extensive practices of code switching (see O'Shannessy, Chapter 5). This contradicts the dominant ideology in many nation states of

the righteousness, validity and normality of single-language speech communities.

Speech communities can be found at all levels of social organization. Nuclear as well as extended families constitute speech communities. Immigrant families that have settled in Europe participate in multilingual speech communities. Market-places in multilingual towns are speech communities too, and can be the setting for elaborate multilingual transactions. A nation, with its official language(s), and its laws on language(s) of education and public affairs is, at another level, a speech community.

3.3.2.3   'Communities' in the context of endangered languages

Both the above notions are challenged in endangered language situations so that endangered language communities must be envisaged as a combination of both. On the one hand, if the notion of 'language' is a matter of controversy, even for larger languages, it is a particularly complex issue with endangered languages in terms of language as an autonomous entity, clearly bounded and defined. Linguists may often have difficulties establishing the boundaries of an endangered language, due to lack of description of these languages and the absence of the kind of social consensus that writing traditions and accompanying standardization processes provide. Speakers themselves may have even more difficulty in identifying such languages as 'languages' for any number of reasons. In the first place, they might not even see them as 'real' languages, but think of them rather as 'jargon', 'lenguas', 'patois', 'slang' without grammar; and, even if they think of it as 'their' language, they are in general more conscious of local differences than of commonalities they share with neighbouring dialects of the same language (which accordingly may be considered unintelligible or completely separate from the local tongue). This means that, if there is a sense of community, it is more likely to remain at a local level of dialect community, rather than encompass a larger and more abstract level of language community.

The great variety of types of speakers (see section 3.2) also makes it more difficult to establish what endangered language communities are. The issue here lies in where to draw the boundaries of the community, in the sense of which types of speakers are included or not, and whether there is a consensus about who belongs and who does not belong to the language community (Dorian 1982). This consensus can be based on linguistic competence, or on ethnic and cultural identity without much trace of actual linguistic competence. Sometimes there is no such consensus; for example, when (older) fluent speakers do not consider partially competent speakers (semi-speakers, terminal speakers, rememberers) as real speakers, and may or may not consider them full members of the language community, while the latter may include themselves and their peers.

Another reason for difficulty in establishing the boundaries of an endangered language community is linked to processes of self-categorization. As we have seen, some speakers may hide their competence and refuse to be considered members of the community of speakers. Others, on the other hand, might think of themselves as speakers in spite of having limited competence: either in good faith or in order to enjoy the advantages which might be attached to speaker status, especially among 'last speakers'. Large and vital language communities might also have problems of defining boundaries, but this issue of boundary assignment constitutes one of the major challenges in identifying endangered language communities. The difficulty increases of course as the level of endangerment rises.

Endangered language communities are, by definition, multilingual speech communities, since language endangerment happens mostly through shift to a language of wider communication. In the speech community within which an endangered language is embedded, the use of the endangered language is constantly diminishing to the point of not being heard anymore, and may be hard to detect.

Beyond the reduction of numbers of speakers, even those speakers who might use the endangered language may not do so any more, either in public or in private, for any number of reasons. Social networks of endangered language users inexorably dissolve into micro-networks, creating an atomized community, to the point of losing a sense of community, with last speakers not uncommonly finding themselves in total isolation.

Communities identifying with endangered languages share an ancestral or heritage language and include marginal or non-speakers. An endangered language community thus includes all the different kinds of speakers who identify with that language, from last speakers to their family members, to supporters of revitalization projects who are not necessarily learners of the language but participate in cultural activities. The notion of ANCESTRAL LANGUAGE COMMUNITY is particularly important in the case of revitalization efforts for very endangered languages, as is the case with many North American communities of native peoples reclaiming their cultures and languages today (Hinton and Hale 2001, Hinton, Chapter 15).

3.3.3 Consciousness of endangerment and attitudes toward endangerment

The sense of the existence of an endangered language community depends crucially on the local level of consciousness of language endangerment, and of local attitudes toward this situation. Consciousness and attitudes may vary greatly from one community to another, and may also change drastically over time, so that both factors must be assessed independently for each community and at each step of a project.

The general level of consciousness within endangered language communities has been rising in the last two decades in most regions of the world. It has come in some cases from communities themselves demanding recognition of their identity and rights, while in other cases it can be a response to external events that confront a community with loss of an ancestral language.[10]

Discussions about safeguarding the world's biocultural diversity, international declarations of human linguistic rights, and worldwide declarations by the UN and UNESCO on INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE have all increased the general awareness of the phenomenon of language endangerment. Today, endangered language communities can be found at all points on a continuum from lack of awareness or interest and indifference to linguists, to emerging awareness and corresponding openness to outside linguists, to the extreme of a militant stand with respect to the situation of endangerment and demands to linguists and politicians.

Today, one should expect constant change within endangered language communities. This requires fieldworkers to be flexible, and attentive to what the changes mean in terms of possibilities and conditions for any project on the language. In case of initially uninterested communities, it is not uncommon that the mere presence of the linguist might raise the level of consciousness and influence attitudes. In the case of hostile or reluctant communities, one may be well advised to wait and opt to work with a more welcoming community (sometimes simply a matter of going from one village to another) and anticipate that a certain domino effect may affect attitudes. Watching what happens in other communities, and observing the effect of the presence of a linguist working on the endangered language, may in time melt reluctance.

This raises the important issue that time is of the essence in work on endangered languages. But time pressure is not so much born of urgency from outside, as much as the time needed for endangered language communities to become aware of what losing their language may mean to them, and arrive at the point of wanting to do something about it themselves, which is perhaps best measured in terms of decades in most situations.[11]

3.4 Discussion

This section raises a number of issues about the proposed speaker typology (3.4.1), and about the impact of such a typology on the task of assessing the level of vitality of a language (3.4.2). Another line of unavoidable discussion considers the kind of terminology linguists have been using when talking about endangered languages and their speakers (3.4.3). This, in turn, raises the question of a new approach to work on endangered languages, as a NEW LINGUISTICS paradigm acknowledges the role

of endangered language activists (3.4.4). In such an undertaking, the human factor is to be taken as seriously as technological and linguistic aspects. In the field, everything rests on relations between endangered language speakers, members of communities (whether speakers or not), and linguists, who are still mostly outsiders, but will hopefully in the future come more and more from the communities themselves (3.4.5).

3.4.1   The proposed typology of speakers

The proposed typology is a WORKING TYPOLOGY, in the sense that one should not pigeonhole speakers simply for the sake of it. In the first place, this would not make much sense; also, one might suspect that it could never be done considering the infinite variety of situations and their fluidity. This typology is a means to an end, that of helping sensitize anyone intending to work on endangered languages to the great diversity of speakers, by proposing ways to observe, analyse and talk about it.

The typological model espoused has several characteristics. First of all, it is multidimensional (see 3.2.2–3.2.4)[12]. It was argued earlier that such a typology is useful for assessing which speakers are likely to engage, or not, in work on the language, be it for documentation, description or revitalization. It clearly takes time to identify endangered language speakers, although having the typology in mind should help researchers to recognize more readily the kinds of speakers. Finally, it was emphasized how important it is to take into consideration the fact that endangered language field situations are in constant flux, and that any assessment of the number and types of speakers will need regular updating.

Lastly, we should warn that one of the reasons the typology will remain somewhat fluid is that views of what makes 'good speakers' are not the same on the part of linguists (who rely on linguistic traits such as ability to provide complete paradigms of data) and of speakers who pay more attention to sociolinguistic traits such as loyalty towards the language (and so might reject loanwords from contact languages).[13]

3.4.2   Evaluating language vitality

One of the points of the typology of endangered language speakers presented here is to demonstrate how it is practically impossible to count endangered language speakers. The difficulties include locating and identifying speakers in the first place, then evaluating their competence, which is also not so readily done, and then deciding, according to the final objective of the census, on the threshold of language competence to be considered in order to decide who to count in.

One context in which the issue of counting speakers arises is in the exercise of evaluating the level of vitality of a given language, such as through the UNESCO questionnaire (UNESCO 2010; see Grenoble,

Chapter 2). It should be clear from the present discussion that, in most cases, the best figures will be only estimates, and that better estimates can only be reached after much time in the field, through long-standing working relations with members of the community.

Clearly, the only way to improve reporting on endangered languages will be to confront head-on the issues of the great variety of speakers and the complexity of the notion of endangered language communities.

3.4.3   A pervasive terminological issue

One striking feature of all the discussions on endangered languages is the nature of the terminology used. The terms first established in the literature are all oriented toward a clinical diagnosis of loss, limitation and deviance, with a touch of doom. For instance one reads about 'language death' (e.g. Crystal 2000), and about 'dying' or 'moribund' languages.

The same terminology issue features prominently in existing proposals for typologies of endangered language speakers. Some speakers have been labelled 'weak' or 'imperfect', for instance, and the category of so-called 'terminal' speakers has even been subdivided into 'pre-terminal', 'better terminal' and 'worse terminal'. As for the emblematic 'semi-speakers' category, it is often taken so literally by non-specialists that it seems to evoke incompetent speakers, in spite of the fact that the category explicitly includes fluent speakers of a certain type.

Another terminological issue involves the traditional term 'informant', which was used in fieldwork textbooks until recently to describe speakers with whom linguists work to document and/or describe an endangered language. This term has also been subject to discussion in recent times, although no agreed-upon term has emerged: one finds in the literature alternative terms such as CONSULTANT or LANGUAGE TEACHER, for instance (Newman and Ratliff 2001a).

Some might be tempted to dismiss this terminology issue as one of political correctness, pertaining to the ivory tower of academia. But the issue needs to be dealt with in the real world. What is at stake is the nature of the relationship of outsiders, such as academic linguists, with language activists inside endangered-language communities (see section 3.4.4).

As suggested by members of many indigenous communities from the Americas, there is another way to look at the issue of language endangerment: to consider the miracle of the survival of so many languages, in spite of fierce adversity over the centuries and active attempts to destroy the peoples, their cultures and their languages.[14] So rather than focus on loss, the exercise might be to focus on survival and resistance, and acknowledge those that have safeguarded the languages, in whatever form, up until today. But whatever change in terminology might achieve

this recognition, it might be advisable to hear what the people involved have to say, as increasingly members of endangered language communities are becoming engaged in efforts to document and revitalize their languages.

3.4.4   Endangered language communities and the 'new linguistics' paradigm

The relationship between linguists and speakers and communities has been considered in terms of power relations between the researcher and the researched, as individuals or as communities (Cameron *et al.* 1993a, Craig 1993, Grinevald 1997). Cameron originally suggested that over the second half of the twentieth century the way fieldwork was conducted followed an evolution through various stages. The traditional method of fieldwork ON the language had evolved by the 1970s to a more activist stand on fieldwork FOR the speakers and their communities, then developed into a collaborative framework of fieldwork WITH speakers, typical of the empowerment and action-research approach of the 1990s. This concept of an evolving fieldwork framework was applied to fieldwork on endangered languages by Craig (1993) and Grinevald (1997), and a final step in the empowerment process was added, at the request of interested parties, with the notion of work BY the speakers themselves (Grinevald 2002, 2007; echoed in Rice 2006).

Fieldwork frameworks have evolved yet further, so that in the twenty-first century, the dominant paradigm for work on endangered languages is conceived in terms of discourse about CAPACITY BUILDING, matching discourse on international policy developed by the United Nations or UNESCO, which is centred around the notion of GOOD PRACTICE. Florey (2008) suggests the term NEW LINGUISTICS for this more participatory and politicized approach to work on endangered languages. Its main characteristic is to put language activism in a central position, and to consider how external language activists (generally academic linguists) will support internal language activists (members of the endangered language community, of any type). As expected, this approach (whether termed empowerment or new linguistics) has a profound impact on how to conceive ethics, methods and practices in the field (Craig 1992a; Grinevald 2002, 2007; Dobrin and Berson, Chapter 10).

More and more often, fieldwork on endangered languages can no longer be conceived of as the enterprise of lone academics working with individual speakers.[15] This means that whether or not one wants to think of 'the community', and whether or not one feels inclined to deal with it, 'the community' is likely to feel that it has a stake in whatever the linguists do, whatever its link to the endangered language actually is. Indigenous communities all over the world are becoming aware of their internationally recognized rights over intellectual property, their

control over strategies, and project planning in accordance with their aspirations and needs (see Bowern, Chapter 23). The extent of this pressure varies across regions of the world, but fieldworkers in Australia and North and South America have certainly had to embrace it.[16]

3.4.5   The human factor

Whether talking about individual speakers or the communities to which they feel they belong, this chapter has sought to emphasize human factors in the enterprise of work on endangered languages.

Regarding speakers, the most important issue is to work with the positive energies that exist, to be careful about undercurrents of linguistic insecurity, and not to overlook speakers who may at first not seem to have much to offer. As far as communities are concerned, one has to bear in mind that, by definition, they have often been traumatized into abandoning their language. They are all, to some extent, marginalized, and are often, as well expressed by Bowern (2008: 165), 'exhausted communities'. This means that it is wise not to plan overambitious projects that would put more stress on their limited resources and capacities, and prevent them from becoming empowered as full participants in the projects. Capacity building is of the essence, but it is a slow process that must be appropriately paced.

Linguists working on endangered languages often find themselves in challenging field situations that their academic training has done little to prepare them for. These situations require stamina, commitment bordering on stubbornness, and infinite inventiveness and flexibility. But they are also, for sure, a unique opportunity to participate in safeguarding the threatened biocultural and linguistic diversity of this world, and to find a real purpose for our hard-earned linguistic competences that make us valuable partners in describing, documenting and revitalizing the endangered languages of the world.

Notes

1 This evaluation of competence in endangered languages is problematic because of a lack of description and standards, and can only be determined following ample time in the field and by developing long-standing relationships with speakers.

2 This section has benefitted from extensive exchanges with Nancy Dorian. A much more detailed and updated discussion of the complex issue of accurately distinguishing between speakers, and of the differences between linguists' assessments of endangered language speakers and the speakers' own assessments is found in Dorian 2009.

3 This type of speaker was first identified through fieldwork on Francoprovençal in France (Bert 2001). They were the wives of self-proclaimed speakers who would stand in the back of kitchens watching their husbands being interviewed and would occasionally correct or complete the answers of their husband, while insisting that they did not know the language.

4 A particular instance of a last speaker was Ishi, the last survivor of the Yahi of Northern California described by Kroeber (1961). At the time he was encountered by white settlers, he was not particularly old, spoke Yana fluently, and had no living kin who also spoke the language. He is a striking example of how a language can die with its last perfectly fluent speaker (and, in his case, highly cultured individual).

5 The process of identifying last speakers of languages has probably been exacerbated in recent years under pressure from the media, looking for stories to attract public attention to the phenomenon of language death.

6 There is another special case of positive dynamics worth mentioning: that of research linguists becoming (very) good speakers of the language they are working on, and possibly becoming a so-called 'last speaker'. The late Ken Hale, who famously learned to speak the languages he worked on as a linguist with remarkable and rapidly acquired fluency, may have been considered such for a number of the Australian Aboriginal languages he carried out research on, such as Lardil from northern Queensland.

7 There are striking cases such as the late Harry Buchanan who is reported by Eades 1979 to have continued to speak the Gumbay-nggir language to his dog, in the absence of any other human interlocutors.

8 Although some very good speakers may refuse to work with linguists, or to teach their language to anyone else.

9 It is common in land claims that the use of a particular language is one of the parameters for the recognition of the boundaries of a territory and traditional associations of the claimants with it. There are numerous instances in Australia, North America and Latin America in which the help of linguists in studying TOPONYMS has been welcomed as a useful contribution in such legal disputes.

10 This was the case with the Rama community in Nicaragua that realized the significance of the loss of its otherwise quite despised ancestral language in the context of new autonomy laws giving linguistic rights to all ethnic communities (Craig 1992a, Grinevald 2007).

11 See for instance the case of the Rama language project in Grinevald (2007).

12 Increasingly important in works on language revitalization is the issue of ideology (Kroskrity 2009; Spolsky, Chapter 8).

13 Thanks to Dorian (p.c. and 2009) for pointing out the irreducibility of the typology to simple categories of speakers because of this situation.

14 See e.g. Hinton (2004) on Californian Indian demands, and England (1998) and Grinevald (2002) on the demands of the Mayas of Guatemala.

15 This evolution has been clear during the careers of both co-authors, who carried out traditional fieldwork on a language at the time of their thesis work (the 1970s in Guatemala for Craig, the 1990s in France for Bert), but who are both now involved in projects focused on revitalization within the 'new linguistics' paradigm (see Grinevald 2007, Bert et al. 2009) in response to local demands.

16 See Grinevald 2007 on differences between doing fieldwork on endangered languages in America (or Australia) versus Africa (or India).