Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language No. 7

Investigating obsolescence

Studies in language contraction and death

Languages die for political, economic and cultural reasons, and can disappear remarkably quickly. Between ten and fifty per cent of all languages currently spoken can be considered endangered, but it is only in the past ten years or so that due importance has been given to the study of contracting and dying languages. This volume represents the first attempt to give a broad overview of current research in this developing field, and to examine some of the crucial methodological and theoretical issues to which it has given rise. It includes twenty studies by scholars who, taken together, have worked on a range of languages currently under threat across the globe. They occur in diverse speech communities where the expanding languages are not only those that are very familiar – English, Spanish, or French, for example – but also Swedish, Arabic, Thai, etc. The final part of the volume is devoted to a consideration of the implications of research into language obsolescence for other aspects of linguistics and anthropology – first and second language acquisition, historical linguistics, and the study of pidgins and creoles and of language and social process. As a whole, this collection will certainly stimulate further and better co-ordinated research into a topic of direct relevance to sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics.
Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language

The aim of this series is to develop theoretical perspectives on the essential social and cultural character of language by methodological and empirical emphasis on the occurrence of language in its communicative and interactional settings, on the socioculturally grounded “meanings” and “functions” of linguistic forms, and on the social scientific study of language use across cultures. It will thus explicate the essentially ethnographic nature of linguistic data, whether spontaneously occurring or experimentally induced, whether normative or variational, whether synchronic or diachronic. Works appearing in the series will make substantive and theoretical contributions to the debate over the sociocultural-functional and structural-formal nature of language, and will represent the concerns of scholars in the sociology and anthropology of language, anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, and socioculturally informed psycholinguistics.

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Investigating obsolescence

Studies in language contraction and death

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Preface

This volume came about in response to a need which had become time-consumingly obvious to the editor: people investigating a wide variety of precariously placed speech forms, in geographically diverse locations, were working in ignorance of each other’s efforts. A kind of clearinghouse role had fallen to me, simply because I had published a book in a subfield which had no journal or other regular publication outlet, the subfield which had come to be known (for better or worse) as “language death”. I was spending increasing amounts of time putting researchers in touch with colleagues whose work was likely to be of interest to them, arduously passing along information on a case-by-case basis. Very late one night I found myself considering alternative solutions to the problem; this volume represents one of those alternatives.

Because of the circumstances in which the volume was conceived, a firm, ongoing part of the enterprise has been intercommunication: dissemination of methodologies, data, ideas, analyses, implications, hypotheses. A set of focus questions (see Introduction) was circulated to all potential contributors to help stimulate thinking along various but shared lines, and a month or so after the target date for first drafts from contributors, each manuscript then in hand was circulated to those who were clearly working on matters of relevance to one another’s subject. Contributors were encouraged to correspond with each other and to incorporate crossreferences to each other’s papers in their own chapters. All of the internal crossreferencing in this volume arises from authors’ perception of what in other papers has special relevance to their own work, not from the editor’s perception.

The inclusion of invited commentaries by scholars expert in one or more areas for which the study of language obsolescence might have special value was likewise intended as a form of crossfertilization. The commentator role was intentionally kept as fluid as possible: each commentator received all 20 papers from Parts I and II, with no individual apportionment of responsibility but rather a free hand to treat any material whatever, from any paper, which seemed of interest and particular importance to the commentator’s specialty.

All Part I and II contributors were originally offered the choice of writing
a single longer paper or two related papers, one longer and one shorter; in case of the latter choice, material more clearly connected with social questions would be presented in one paper and material more clearly connected with questions of linguistic structure would be presented in the other. Although a number of contributors initially chose this option, various considerations eventually led to the unitary choice except in the case of Egyptian Nubian, which Professor Aleya Rouehdy has indeed treated from quite different perspectives in two papers, one in each of the first two parts.

A great deal of good will, cooperation, flexibility, and good nature went into the preparation of this volume. The chapter contributors endured, and responded to cheerfully, a high volume of editorial communication on matters great and small; the commentators tackled their large-scale assignments with seeming relish. Word processing was expertly handled by Hubbard Goodrich of West Harpswell, Maine, invaluably at home with both computers and linguistics. Penny Carter of Cambridge University Press was a model of both efficient and benevolent oversight. Over two fiscal years Bryn Mawr College provided, through its Madge Miller Fund for support of faculty research, the considerable funds which allowed multiple photocopying for circulation of papers among contributors and for whole-text circulation to commentators, as well as funds for word processing. Polly Johnsen spent a generous part of her Maine “vacation” creating the first draft of the Index of Languages. Megan Klose brought order to an untidily stitched bibliography as it approached final amalgamation. David Odell worked far beyond the bounds of simple duty in helping to subdue the copy produced by an editor-indexer with grandiose notions unmatched by her physical capacity. Suzanne Romaine unflinchingly kept to a schedule which foreseably placed a visit to me at a deadline time in the volume’s production when her ability to enter IPA symbols and various diacritics by hand would be heavily drawn upon. Since it was her interest in the project which had brought it to the attention of Cambridge University Press at the outset, her help at manuscript-delivery time was the perfect — literal and figurative — finishing touch.

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Most of us feel that we could never become extinct. The Dodo felt that way, too.

Will Cuppy, *How to become extinct*