

University of Massachusetts Occasional Papers in Linguistics

Volume 26 *The UMOP Volume on Indigenous Languages – University of Massachusetts Occasional Papers vol 20*

Article 2

2000

Introduction: On *Indigenous* Languages

Elena Benedicto
Purdue University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/umop>



Part of the [Linguistics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Benedicto, Elena (2000) "Introduction: On *Indigenous* Languages," *University of Massachusetts Occasional Papers in Linguistics*: Vol. 26 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/umop/vol26/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Linguistics Students Association (GLSA) at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Massachusetts Occasional Papers in Linguistics by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Introduction: On *Indigenous Languages*

Elena Benedicto

Purdue University

In fact, the title of this introduction should be: *On Indigenous Languages, The Linguists That Study Them And The Communities That Speak Them*, but as a title it is too long. However, that is what this Introduction is mainly about.

The idea for this volume was born out of two 'events' that took place in a short period of time. One was a seminar at UMass-Amherst in the fall of 1994 on the grammar of an uncommonly taught language: Yup'ik. Emmon Bach and Walkie Charles conducted that seminar. The other event was my first trip with Ken Hale to Nicaragua, to study the Tuahka variant of Mayangna, and then to Honduras to study the Tawahka variant spoken there. This happened in January and February of 1995. These two events were the seed for this volume that finally comes to your hands. They also added a whole new dimension to the way I was to do linguistics since then, but that is another story. The goal of producing a volume on indigenous languages with contributions from different fields in linguistics was to show to the linguistic world (maybe just once more), and more specifically to the formal theoretical world of linguistics, that the contribution of indigenous languages to the development of theoretical analyses could be enormous. Immediately, though, this goal generated another, the other side of the coin, like Janus, the two-faced god of the Romans: not what indigenous languages may do for you, the linguist, but what you, the linguist, can do for indigenous languages (and the communities that speak them). More and more, these two sides are becoming inextricably intertwined.

The first 'issue' to deal with, however, happened to be a basic conceptual one: what do we mean by 'indigenous languages'? I initially came up with the word 'indigenous' because the languages I had been most recently exposed to were in fact Native American languages and the adjective *indigenous* is most often associated with them. The idea I had in mind, however, was much more inclusive than that and more in tune with the use of 'indigenous' as used to refer to populations:¹ it definitely included aboriginal languages of Australia, African languages, languages of the Pacific Rim, etc... languages that, somehow, were original to the place in question, which is what *indigenous* means. In that

¹ The United Nations uses basically three criteria in its International Labor Organization's documents: pre-colonial continuity, cultural distinctiveness and self-identification. The criterion of aboriginality (being the first in the land) is relaxed in their definition of 'tribal peoples' (see ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, 1989, no.169; Barsh (1999)).

sense, however, every language is *indigenous*: since every language originates in some place, every language is *indigenous* (native) to that place. This latter sense, thus, was too broad. It seemed that I had touched on the *ante quem* and *post quem* points: the notion I was after lay somewhere in the middle. Other labels have been used, in different contexts, for the set of languages that I had in mind. They include, for instance, *aboriginal* and *endangered*. *Aboriginal* (being the first ones in the land) is almost exclusively used for the languages of Australia, and it runs into some of the same problems described right above for *indigenous*. As for *endangered*, some of the languages that I wanted to include were indeed endangered; others, however, were quite healthy, by no means in danger of disappearing. Some, quite the opposite, were thriving and even stepping over some neighbors.² The feature that seemed to encompass all of them, however, (apart from being uncommonly taught at American or Western institutions) is that they and the communities that speak them had been at some point in their history *colonized* by a Western power, some by more than one.

It seems, thus, that the notion I was after corresponds to the intersection of several notions: languages that have been at some point in their (recent) history oppressed by (usually) a colonizing power³ and which, mostly as a result of this or just by simple negligence or disinterest, have been, for the most part, overlooked or ignored in linguistic research.⁴ Ken Hale has referred to these as *local* languages. Most of them, though not necessarily all, are also endangered languages whose speakers and corresponding communities have little means if any to reverse the situation; most of them, as Bobaljik and Pensalfini (1996) argue, are also spoken in communities that are economically depressed and that have been cut off from their traditional sources of wealth; in most of these communities, if children are going to school, they are not being taught in their native language but in the dominant language; in general, these communities are undergoing a dangerous process of acculturation (in favor of the dominant language and culture). All of which adds up to a general situation of dire straits...

Having just defined what I mean by 'indigenous language' for the purposes of this volume, let me now turn to the two goals of this volume: the contribution of indigenous languages to formal linguistics, and the contribution of linguists to indigenous languages.

With respect to the first one, the papers in this volume contribute a variety of solutions to theoretical problems currently under development. Such is the case of the papers by John Alderete on Cupeño's stress patterns and on Jamaican Creole's iteratives, and by Caroline Jones on reduplication patterns in Umpila and Mangarrayi within current discussions in Optimality Theory. The papers by Laura Benua on Yup'ik's antipassive, by Mike Dickey on switch reference patterns in Miskitu's clause chaining, and by Ellen Woolford on the Agreement systems of Ruwund provide new data and new theoretical approaches to syntactic issues on the nature of functional projections, the nature of Agreement as a syntactic operation and on sentence architecture, addressing interpretational correlates relevant to the syntax-semantics interface. Finally, other papers are more descriptive in

² Such is the case of Miskitu in Eastern Nicaragua, which has been pushing aside less 'prestigious' languages such as Sumu and Ulwa since the 17th century when the British gave them arms (and thus military power over their neighbors). Bobaljik and Pensalfini (1996) also mention the case of Walpiri with respect to other smaller indigenous languages, and Barsh (1999) mentions different cases through Africa, where smaller groups (such as the Maasai in Kenya) are being oppressed by other neighboring African peoples. Of course, these more 'powerful' groups are in turn oppressed by the corresponding European dominant language.

³ Or, as in the case of Creoles, languages that have been created as a result of the actions of a colonizing power.

⁴ The case of Spain is especially telling: having colonized more than half of the American continent, it has, as of now, no department for the study of indigenous languages in any of its universities (though a handful of individuals do work on them). The situation in Britain or France, though a little better, is definitely not impressive. (Thanks to M.C. Junyent and N. Ostler for data on this).

nature, providing data that will contribute to theoretical debates. Such is the case of Emmon Bach's paper on the morphology of Haisla, and the paper by myself and Ken Hale about dialectal variation in the morphology and syntax of Mayangna, a language of the isolate Misumalpan group. In all, nine different languages are discussed in this volume, from three different continents, addressing theoretical issues ranging from phonology and morphology to morpho-syntax, syntax and syntax-semantics.

The point is that the contribution of these languages to linguistics does not just lie on providing the range of linguistic variation, of linguistic diversity that any explanatory theory of language has to account for. The kind of work that can be done with these languages is not merely descriptive. On the contrary, they can contribute greatly to the development of explanatory theories of language, much in the same way that the in-depth study of French and Italian within the generative tradition in the late 70s and early 80s contributed to the development of basic aspects of the Principles and Parameters framework in subsequent years.

This said, we need now to turn our attention to the other goal of this volume, the other side of the coin: what is in there for the indigenous languages and communities. Two of the papers in this volume partially address that question. Bach's paper attempts to use a writing style that is comprehensible (and thus useful) to both linguists and members of the community without much specific training in linguistics. The paper by Benedicto and Hale tries to answer a question posed by the community itself: how different is one dialectal variant from the other. Both of these papers attempt to fulfill a request that is often heard from the indigenous communities: the need for the work of specialists to return to the community, to inform the community of the results of our investigations. Of course, in the basis of all this lies the question of *empowerment*, maybe an overused word by now, though not so the concept behind it: the right of communities to use and control their languages. Its significance is still very much alive, and the linguist can have an important role there. The contribution of the linguist can come, for instance, in the training of local indigenous linguists, an excellent way of empowering communities, so that they have the elements necessary to make decisions on their own language.⁵ A crucial notion, in my opinion, is that of collaboration. Not many of us have the resources or the technical knowledge to do some of the things that the communities need; however, we can team up with local institutions or local groups that may have some of those resources: the sum of the individual strengths will definitely provide a much more powerful output.⁶

It is with this team spirit in mind that I want to conclude these initial remarks: let's each do what we know how to do, and let's do it together. Let me thus thank everybody that has participated in this project: the authors, for their work and their patience, the GLSA managers that have seen this volume through their tenure (Kiyomi Kusumoto, Pius Tamanji, Mako Hirotoni, Uri Strauss and, especially, Ana Arregui for her support in the last stages) and, most importantly, the speakers of all the languages that are in this book. Thank you!

And to the reader, I hope you enjoy the papers...

⁵ Examples of this (to mention just some of the ones where authors in this volume are involved in) are the training programs in Eastern Nicaragua, in British Columbia, and in Massachusetts (with the Wampanoag community).

⁶ For very insightful ideas on the role and responsibilities of the linguists vis à vis the languages they work on, see Bach (1995) and Hale et al. (1992), especially the section by Nora England. Ideas that are relevant not only for those directly involved in fieldwork, but also for those that use the data to create theoretical analyses.

References

- Barsh, R. 1999. 'The World's Indigenous Peoples.' Ms. Dept. of Native American Studies, University of Lethbridge (Canada).
- Hale, K. et al. 1992. 'Endangered Languages.' *Language* 68:1-42.
- Bach, E. 1995. 'Endangered Languages and The Linguist.' In Ik-Hwan Lee (ed.), *Linguistics in the Morning Calm 3: Selected Papers from SICOL-1992*. Seoul: Hanshin Publishing Company. 31-43.
- Bobaljik, J.D. and R. Pensalfini. 1996. 'Introduction.' In J.D. Bobaljik, R. Pensalfini and L. Storto (eds.), *Papers on Language Endangerment and the Maintenance of Linguistic Diversity*. MIT Working Papers in Linguistics, vol. 28:1-24.

Elena E. Benedicto
Program in Linguistics
Heavilon Hall 307B
Purdue University

benedict@omni.cc.purdue.edu