Linguistic Ecology

Language change and linguistic imperialism in the Pacific region

Peter Mühlhäusler

Linguistic ecology

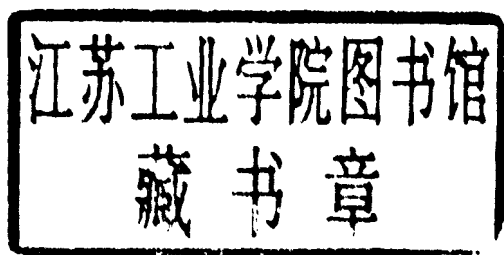Language change and linguistic
imperialism in the Pacific region

Peter Mühlhäusler

The outcome of this process is that in the course of the past century, a few cases of linguistically imperialist peoples, who had established relatively monolingual but powerful states, have been promulgated as a model for the World.

(Guy 1989: 47)

To Jackie, Beverly and Tim

Acknowledgements

Contents

Illustrations

1 The changing linguistic ecology of the Pacific region

> Ecology shows that a variety of forms is a prerequisite for biological survival. Monocultures are vulnerable and easily destroyed. Plurality in human ecology functions in the same way. One language in one nation does not bring about equity or harmony for the members or groups of that nation.
>
> (Pattanayak 1988: 380)

INTRODUCTION

This book is about linguistic heterogeneity, its decline and the costs of such decline and loss. It is also a book about the study of human languages and the inability of most practising linguists to understand what is happening around them, that their very object of study is disappearing at an alarming rate, that the transition from polylingualism to monolingualism is accelerating, and that the prospects of survival of traditional languages and forms of communication are very slim indeed. To be sure, there is a growing body of literature on topics such as language death, minority languages, language maintenance and standardization. However, in most instances documentation is available for the disappearance of European languages and dialects in Western Europe and North America rather than the loss of traditional non-European languages. Moreover, the approach in most studies is particularistic rather than ecological. The main thrust of this book is that an understanding of language death and ecological matters go hand in hand.

According to Haugen (1985), the ecology of language can be defined as 'interactions between any given language and its language ecology may be defined as the study of environment'. The term 'language ecology', like 'language family', is a metaphor derived from the study of living beings. The view that one can study languages as one studies the interrelationship of organisms with and within their

environments presupposes a number of subsidiary metaphors and assumptions, most notably that languages can be regarded as entities, that they can be located in time and space and that the ecology of languages is at least in part different from that of their speakers. None of these assumptions is without problems and I shall deal with these in the course of this book. However, in the absence of my having immaculate perception or divine insights, my explanations of a new subject matter will of necessity involve use of metaphor. I have found that the ecological metaphor is particularly productive and a great deal more appealing than a systems metaphor. The latter suggests that we can hope for mechanical, albeit complex explanations or that it is indeed legitimate to study a self-contained system or language as part of a larger system. An ecological view, on the other hand, suggests that we can at best achieve partial and local explanations but that we can hope for understanding and empathy.[1]

The ecological metaphor in my view is action oriented. It shifts the attention from linguists being players of academic language games to becoming shop stewards for linguistic diversity, and to addressing moral economic and other 'non-linguistic' issues.[2] The area I shall be concerned with in this book is the Pacific, including Australia and, to a lesser extent, the Pacific rim. This choice is motivated by a number of considerations:

1 the availability of a number of studies on Africa, in particular, that of Calvet (1974) on 'glottophagie' and Phillipson's (1992) study on the impact of English teaching
2 my familiarity, through fieldwork and readings, with the area, its linguistic literature and the linguists practising in it
3 the concentration, in this area, of a very large number of small to very small languages
4 the diversity of ecological changes that have taken place there
5 the neglect of the Pacific languages in most internationally available treatments of language decline.

I trust that many of my findings for the Pacific region will have relevance elsewhere.

ARGUMENTS FOR AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

To understand the linguistic picture of the Pacific means to abandon attempts to view the many languages spoken on geographically isolated islands or inaccessible areas as test cases for language divergence in a family tree model or as an opportunity for linguists to be able to describe 'their' language. Rather, I would like to argue that the

consideration of ecological factors is a prerequisite to any account of either the history or the grammatical structures of languages of an area. It is ecological factors which bring languages into being, define their boundaries and decide on their growth and survival.

The history of the term 'ecology of language' is a recent one. The paper bearing this title was read by Haugen in 1970, and subsequently published in a number of places, including a collection of his papers bearing the same title (Haugen 1972). Haugen rejects the narrow view that 'the referential world to which language provides an index' constitutes this environment; he states that 'the true environment of a language is the society that uses it as one of its codes' (Haugen 1972: 325). His subsequent discussions of 'environment' make it clear that Haugen sees more in the ecology of language than just sociology of language or the study of speech situations or contexts. The study of language ecology is a complex job which involves the collaboration of a number of disciplines, as is made explicit in the following catalogue of questions that Haugen lists as relevant to forming a picture of the ecology of a given language.

For any given 'language', then, we should want to have answers to the following ecological questions:

(1) What is its *classification* in relation to other languages?

(2) Who are its *users*? This is a question of *linguistic demography*, locating its users with respect to locale, class, religion or any other relevant grouping;

(3) What are its *domains* of use? This is a question of *sociolinguistics*, discovering whether its use is unrestricted or limited in specific ways;

(4) What *concurrent languages* are employed by its users? We may call this a problem of *dialinguistics, to identify the degree* of bilingualism present and the degree of overlap among the languages;

(5) What *internal varieties* does the language show? This is the task of a *dialectology* that will recognize not only regional, but also social and contactual dialects;

(6) What is the nature of its *written traditions*? This is the province of *philology*, the study of written texts and their relationship to speech;

(7) To what degree has its written form been *standardized*, i.e. unified and codified? This is the province of prescriptive linguistics, the traditional grammarians and lexicographers;

(8) What kind of *institutional support* has it won, either in government, education, or private organizations, either to

regulate its form or propagate it? We may call this study *glottopolitics*;

(9) What are the *attitudes* of its users towards the language, in terms of intimacy and status, leading to personal identification? We may call this the file of *ethnolinguistics*;

(10) Finally, we may wish to sum up its status in a *typology* of *ecological* classification, which will tell us something about where the language stands and where it is going in comparison with the other languages of the world.

(Haugen 1972: 336)

A small number of writers, such as Mackay (1980), or those in a collection edited by Enninger and Haynes (1984), have addressed such questions. Arguably, what work has been done has tended to be regarded as part of sociolinguistics and of quite marginal importance to the concern of linguistic theoreticians. The reasons for the failure of the 'ecology of language' to make a greater impact would seem to lie in Haugen's acceptance of a number of key notions held by the linguistic establishment which can be used as arguments to marginalize his varied proposals. Of particular importance would seem to be

1 his view that there can be such a thing as 'a given language'
2 his view that description, history, internal evolution, and so forth, are separate issues to be investigated by different groups of specialists.

These two points are of course interrelated, as it is precisely the reification of 'a language' that enables it to be studied in isolation, outside time, and allows one to distinguish between structure and use. Happily, Haugen avoids another problem which could have occurred with the greatest of ease given his metaphor of an ecology, that is, the problem of regarding languages as natural objects that inhabit the mixed human-made and natural ecology. For Haugen, the family tree metaphor of language can accommodate both the view of natural growth, and 'the development of standard languages' that are 'artefacts that result from either pruning or grafting the tree' by 'a special priesthood of taste and learning' (1972: 266). The possibility that many languages are indeed 'cultural artefacts' is thus acknowledged by Haugen. Let me return to my criticism of the term 'given language' now, which is rendered problematic on two accounts:

1 the lack of linguistic criteria for deciding in all instances on a determinate number of languages in a postulated ecology
2 the problem of separating languages from other forms of communication.

A small body of literature exists on aspects of the former problem in the Pacific area. That it got recognized at all is due mainly to the fact that comparative linguistics, in order to compare languages, need to know what these languages are. Grace (1993a; 1993b) has re-examined the notion of 'languages' as employed by mainstream linguists and demonstrated its insufficiency in cases other than a few mainstream standard national languages. The problem that language and dialect chains posed to their enterprise is discussed by Wurm and Laycock (1962) and Tryon (1979). The criteria appealed to by these investigators are, by and large, cognate counts and similar established procedures of historical linguistics. It is assumed that it is possible to identify languages (though this may in some cases involve additional criteria such as intelligibility or typological similarity). Languages, if not given, are seen to be at least discoverable. Thus, after discussing the problem of dialect and language chains, Tryon (1979: 13) identifies 105 languages for the New Hebrides (Vanuatu).

What most observers fail to realize is that the identification of languages and their subsequent naming is far from being an act of objective description, and it can constitute a very serious trespass on the linguistic ecology of an area. The very view that languages can be counted and named may be part of the disease that has affected the linguistic ecology of the Pacific and, as I shall show in subsequent chapters, an obstacle to attempts to reconstruct the linguistic past. Let me labour this point in more detail.

In many parts of the Pacific, including the New Guinea Highlands (Wurm and Laycock 1962), Micronesia (Bender 1971) and Vanuatu (Tryon 1979) we find long chains of interrelated dialects and languages with no clear internal boundaries. Thus, with regard to Micronesia, a group of very closely related languages are spoken all the way from Truk in the east to Tobi in the west. As observed by Bender (1971) 'there are some indications that it is possible to establish a chain of dialectal connections from one end to the other with all contiguous dialects being mutually intelligible'. However, the question as to how many distinct languages can be counted in the group remains difficult to answer, for those who regard it as a sensible question. Bender (1982: 46) concludes that 'altogether there has between 10 and 20 languages indigenous to the cultural-geographic area of Micronesia. The indeterminacy in numbers reflects the indeterminacy as to languages limit among certain of the nuclear languages.'

In spite of these difficulties, professional linguists have identified such languages as Sonsoralese, Ulithian, Satawalese, Puluwat, Namonuiti and Trukese, the latter having become the language *par*

excellence in this chain, as it is the best described variety and spoken at the centre of economic and communicational activities. A similar situation is found in many other areas; the place where missionaries, administrators or linguists settle becomes the focus of development of linguistic systems of 'language' status. Arbitrary points on a linguistic continuum are made into discrete abstract entities called 'languages' whereas all other reference points on the same continuum, unless of course some important outsider settles there, become marginalized, dialectal deviations from the standard.

Thus brought into being, the languages identified are labelled and classified. On these processes Laycock and Voorhoeve (1971: 509) write, using Papuan languages to illustrate their point:

> A word must be said on nomenclature. Names of languages are cited in the form considered by the authors to be most appropriate, or – in some cases – in the form used in the literature cited; but it must not be assumed that these names have any more validity than as convenient labelling devices. It is rare for speakers of Papuan languages to have a name for themselves, in their own language, as a linguistic unit; rather, they will use a word which simply means 'the people' in an ethnocentric sense, and this term may frequently be much narrower in its extent than the linguistic group. This deficiency of nomenclature has been overcome by European observers in a number of ways:
>
> (1) by using a locality name, which may be the indigenous name of a village, island, mountain valley, or other geographical feature; or it may be an introduced topographical name ('Western Highlands language', 'Big Sepik language', etc.);
> (2) by using a group name given to the people by another tribal group;
> (3) by using a group name: clan, totem, dialect designation;
> (4) by using an arbitrary name based on the language's form for some common word. Those that have been frequently chosen are words for 'man' (Tuo, Moando, Nor, Pondo); 'water' (Ok); 'language' (Kam, Pay, Pila); 'no' (Olo, Elkei, Au); 'what' (gaing); and 'my child' (Natik, Barok).

The same type of naming is used for linguistic groupings. The introduction of such 'convenient labelling devices' has a couple of major side-effects, however. First, it upsets the pre-colonial equilibrium by assigning differential status to different forms of language, thus paving the way for social and economic differentials. Secondly, the misfit between the expatriate tree model of language relationships and

observed linguistic reality becomes attenuated or disappears: reality has been made to conform to the model. The challenge that linguistically complex areas such as Melanesia or North America pose to comparative linguistics has yet to be successfully met. Finally, the existence of separate languages also reduces the significance of fusion and mixture with that of gradience. It enables Pacific linguists such as Biggs (1972) to state that:

> It will be agreed, I think, that anyone who speaks a language A, knows that he is speaking A, and not a different language B. Moreover, a bilingual can always distinguish between the two languages in which he is competent.... At any one time a speaker knows what language he is speaking. He can never claim to be speaking two languages at once, or a fusion of two languages.
>
> (Biggs 1972: 144)

One is led to conclude that the notion of 'a language' is one whose applicability to the Pacific region, and in fact most situations outside those found within modern European type nation-states, is extremely limited. No ecological study can afford to take languages as given. Nor can one expect that linguists will ever be in a position to provide determinate answers as to the number of languages found in any area. A second objection against the notion of 'a given language' is that it constitutes the acceptance of Chomsky's 'independency hypothesis'. This is not the place to go into details as to why such a view is to be discarded, as is the associated sociolinguistic view that a neat separation can be drawn between rules of a language and rules for the use of a language. Arguments in favour of an integrationist view to replace the 'western language myth' have been given by Harris in a number of places (e.g. 1979, 1980, 1990). Arguments in favour of an integrational position include the following.

> Whatever name we choose to give it, this is the principle that as human beings, whose humanity depends on social interaction, we do not inhabit a communicational space that Nature has already divided for us between language and the non-linguistic. Or, to put it another way, language is not an autonomous mode of communication, and languages are not autonomous systems of signs. Integration, in short, is not to be construed on the model of a jigsaw puzzle or construction kit, where we start with separate pieces, some linguistic, others non-linguistic and then fit them together. On the contrary, the jigsaw puzzle is a typically segregationalist model of how a language works.
>
> (Harris 1990: 203)

A thoroughgoing integrationalism would mean taking seriously the consequences of Sapir's observation that communication is based on structural correspondences between certain forms of behaviour in a situational context. It would mean recognizing that passing the salt when asked to do so is no less a linguistic act than uttering the words *Pass the salt, please* in order to get it. Both are complementary manifestations of linguistic knowledge, of proficiency in a language-game, and we unhesitatingly treat them so in the communication situations of everyday life. Only a blind acceptance of the theoretical dogma which equates language with spoken language and thus induces the mistake of identifying vocalization as the mark of the linguistic act *par excellence* will prevent us from recognizing that truth. To make that mistake is on a par with believing that you are not running except during the seconds when your feet touch the ground and only playing tennis at the moments when your racquet hits the ball.

(Harris 1990: 207–8)

For the purposes of an ecological approach to language, the integrationist point is a particularly suitable one, as it is capable of highlighting the complex interdependence between forms of human communication and the multitude of environmental factors. In doing this it leads to understanding of a very complex phenomenon, rather than descriptions of alleged models of arbitrarily isolated aspects of it. A less radical notion of integration, one which leaves open the possibility of 'given languages', is that associated with the work of C. J. N. Bailey. One of Bailey's principal contributions to linguistic theory is that social, stylistic and geographical variation are in fact reflexes of change over time and that a linguistic theory constructed around the notion of change over time can account for the facts of historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, descriptive linguistics, dialectology and stylistics in a uniform manner. His theory thus allows us to integrate the recognized branches of diachronic and synchronic or a-temporal theory, but at the same time further integration with pragmatics, situational or environmental factors is not encouraged. However, the notion that variation and change is ordered and that time needs to be integrated into explanations of human linguistic behaviour is consonant with the general thrust of my arguments.

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

In adopting an integrationist and ecological perspective, our focus will shift from the consideration of countable languages to that of

human communication and from the question of what is happening to languages to what processes bring languages into being and how the nature of these processes affect a linguistic ecology. Leaving aside technical considerations of dialect, language chaining, communalect, boundaries and overlap, it remains clear that the number of ways that the inhabitants of the Pacific have communicated with each other is a very large one. Available accounts speak of up to 4,000 languages, though human awareness as to the number of and interest in these different languages of the Pacific or indeed the world is surprisingly recent. We are looking at a tradition of barely 300 years, a tradition which significantly coincides with the colonial expansion of modern European nation-states. Forerunners were, as pointed out by Max Müller (1875: 143 ff.), 'Christian missionaries who heeded the command "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature".'

Theseo Ambrosia, in 1539, contains the Lord's Prayer in fourteen languages whilst Perion (1554) lists seventy-two languages, a number which allegedly sprang from the Tower of Babel (see Müller 1875). Mageserius gives the Lord's Prayer in fifty languages in 1593. The view that Hebrew was the beginning of all human speech, including that of the New World, continued to be widely held, a view which prevented scholars from considering the possibility of greater diversity and in some instances prompted them to give rather unhelpful advice, such as advising Columbus to take a Hebrew interpreter into the New World.

The first serious collection of a large number of the world's languages is said to have been undertaken by Leibniz who, in his dissertation on the origins of nations (1710), advocates the systematic collection of 'the modern languages which are within our reach' (Leibniz 1713; see also Aarsleff 1982: 99). He was helped in this enterprise by missionaries, ambassadors, and the Czar, Peter the Great.

Leibniz was not to complete his enterprise. Another major attempt at listing the world's languages is that of the Spanish Jesuit Hervas (1735–1809) who had worked in South America and whose catalogue of languages was published in 1800 in six volumes containing, among other things, forty sketch grammars by the author. Meanwhile, in Russia, Katarina the Great devoted herself to the project of an inventory of the world's languages, many from the newly conquered areas of Siberia, others sent to her by ambassadors, monarchs and politicians from around the globe. Müller reports that (1875: 160) the first volume of the Imperial Dictionary appeared in 1787, containing a list of 285 words translated into 51 European and 149 Asiatic languages.