

Conservation and Contestation: In the Crossfire over ‘Diversity’

Shaylih Muehlmann
University of Toronto

Recent work in anthropology has examined the current fascination with ‘biodiversity’ in both academic and popular discourses (Brosius, 1999; Bamford, 2002; Escobar, 1996, 1999). These critiques have argued that, while the term ostensibly describes an objective reality, it simultaneously constructs the threat to the environment in a particular way, prescribing the role that certain actors should play. In this paper I argue that when the concept of biodiversity is brought to bear on the language advocacy movement, the threat to ‘linguistic diversity’ is similarly constructed. I will also consider the ambiguities and contradictions that arise as these environmental discourses are appropriated and transformed in the literature on language endangerment.

According to Sandra Bamford (2002), the term “biodiversity” was rarely encountered in popular discourse even ten years ago but has now become ubiquitous in scientific and non-academic writing. Bamford argues that this fascination is partially attributable to the range of potent meanings the term expresses. She argues:

Encapsulated within its use are an array of meanings including late twentieth century efforts to stave off species extinction; the growth and proliferation of the conservation movement; a thorough-going critique of the destructive tendencies of industrial society; and a growing recognition of the pervasiveness of global interdependencies (36).

There has been a similar increase of interest in the concept of diversity in linguistics, especially in the context of discussions on language obsolescence. Linguists have argued that just as biological diversity is in a state of crisis, so too is cultural diversity and the impending decline in the overall “linguistic diversity” on the earth has been widely cited as evidence of this paralleled crisis.

The surge of interest in linguistic diversity is evident in the proliferation of a number of NGO’s that emerged in the 1990’s to protect the biocultural or biolinguistic diversity of the earth. These include: Linguapax (1987), the Foundation for Endangered Languages (1994) and Terralingua (1996). The growth of interest in the notion of linguistic or biolinguistic diversity is also evident in the scholarly literature on language. Increasingly, linguists have argued that there is a correlation between biological and linguistic diversity

(Harmon, 2002; Hill, 2003; Mufwene, 2001; Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Crystal, 2000; Maffi, 2001). The relationship between linguistic and biological diversity has been characterized in a variety of different ways. For example, the metaphor of language as species has been extended to the concept of a “language ecology,” which has been elaborated as an analogical tool (Haugen, 1972; Mufwene, 2001; Muhlhausler, 1996). In addition, the geographical correlations between areas of high linguistic and biological diversity have prompted examination into the empirical links responsible for this correspondence (Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Maffi, 2001). In this essay, however, I focus on the use of the concept of linguistic, or biolinguistic diversity as a rhetorical device. The parallel between language and species has been widely cited in campaigns to save “endangered” languages. As an introductory example, consider the following image from the Hans Rausing project’s website (School of Oriental and African Studies’ Hans Rausing Endangered Language Project <http://www.eldp.soas.ac.uk/home>).



The metaphorical conflation of language and species which, in this example, results in the presentation of languages as *more* endangered than the most threatened plants and animals, has recently faced critique by linguistic anthropologists working with endangered language communities (Crawford, 1998; England, 2002) who have highlighted the inaccuracies of the analogy. The aim of this paper is to contextualize these critiques within wider anthropological discussions on the concept of biodiversity in environmental conservation programs. I will examine one organization in particular, the Hans Rausing Endangered Language Project¹, which was established at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in the summer of 2002.

Raymond Williams’ *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (1976) provides a useful framework for understanding the complexity of meanings the term ‘diversity’ encompasses. Williams’ notion of a ‘keyword’ is one whose complexity is the result of the following three effects: a keyword connects areas that are generally kept separate, masks radical semantic variation by its continuous verbal identity and often expresses a contradiction (McKeon, 1977). In what follows I will trace these three effects in the emergence of the keyword ‘diversity’ in both environmental and linguistic discourses.

Critics of contemporary environmentalism have identified some of the contradictions inherent in the concept of biodiversity. Arturo Escobar has argued that rather than challenging the basic premises of modern industrial society, campaigns to conserve biological diversity represent a deepening of capitalist interests into the Third World (1996). Bamford (2002) makes a similar claim emphasizing that the narratives produced by biodiversity advocates often read more like a manual on saving late twentieth century

¹ Since this paper was written the website of the Hans Rausing Endangered Language Project has been significantly redesigned. Their former website, from which the examples for this paper were taken, has been discontinued. The Hans Rausing Project’s new website (<http://www.hrelp.org/>) contains little of the rhetorical content described in this essay.

capitalist society (p. 40). In her research on the organization called Conservation International, Bamford notes that one of the organization's most aggressive campaigns to date has been centered on the field of "bioprospecting." Bamford points out that the mandate of their "Shaman's Apprentice Program" is to "encourage local tribes to record their knowledge, to be proud of their culture, and profit from it economically" (quoted in Bamford, 2002, p. 40).

A similar tension is evident in the narratives produced by advocates of linguistic diversity. This tension is particularly apparent in the recent interest that pharmaceutical companies have taken in the organic biotechnology of indigenous² cultures. Michael Silverstein argues³ that there is a parallel between how linguists are perceived by many local communities, as "extractors" of cultural wealth and pharmaceutical companies who find local remedies and the expert knowledge of shamans and develop this knowledge in the for-profit global industrial sector. In the Amazon basin alone, Western pharmacologists have co-opted hundreds of local plant remedies whose active properties have been synthesized in laboratories across the globe (Wooten & Iwu, 2002). Silverstein claims that arguments by the "endangered language Greens" among linguists for rescuing local linguistic-conceptual "wealth" have as much of a hollow ring as the statements that ethnopharmacologists make to local peoples.

In addition to the cultural and biotechnological 'wealth' that the corporate West has become interested in, Bamford argues that genetic variation is increasingly portrayed as being at risk along with endangered languages. In the words of a member of the Human Genome Diversity Project:

Of the roughly 5000 languages in the world, 90% are expected to be lost or doomed to extinction by the 21st century. Genetically distinct populations could disappear with them, some by physical extinction, but mostly by admixture with other groups (Gillis, quoted in Bamford 2002, p. 43).

Bamford describes how members of the Human Genome Diversity Project have collected samples of DNA to be stored in a permanent database of human genetic variation. In this way, they intend to study the cells of the indigenous people, even if the people themselves disappear. As a result, an important corollary of contemporary conservation rhetoric is that it serves to 'naturalize' Third world peoples by presenting them as an endangered 'sub-species' and construing their genetic material as more valuable than their lives (Bamford 2002).

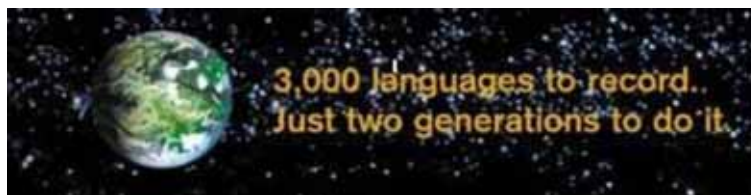
The campaign material of endangered language programs has also been critiqued for appearing to prioritize languages over their speakers (cf. Fishman 2002). This privileging of language is particularly evident in campaigns that focus on archiving languages as opposed to revitalizing them. The Hans Rausing Project is specifically geared towards the *archiving* of linguistic diversity. They justify this mandate by arguing that "a handful of

² The endangered language communities that are foregrounded in the literature on language loss are often identified as 'indigenous.' The notion of indigeneity is problematic in this context because it assumes a 'natural' connection between communities and the environment and because it obscures the fact that many communities of endangered language speakers are left out by this assumption (for example, Gaelic in Cape Breton).

³ Personal correspondence, October 31st, 2002.

civilizations left us the ideas that form the basis of today's world. Countless others left behind nothing. No thoughts, insights or culture. Because they left us no language (SOAS, 2002)." The argument continues: "Without a language record a civilization is dead. With no hope of resurrection. And with 3,000 of the planet's 6,000 language cultures now facing threat of extinction in *your* lifetime, that's something humanity can't afford to let happen." The sinister implication here that a 'civilization' is not really dead if it has been documented echoes the Genome project's apparent de-prioritization of the lives in question.

As we can see from this excerpt, the Hans Rausing project frames the crisis facing linguistic diversity by enumerating a set of statistics. Jane Hill (2002) has argued that this tactic of enumeration is a common 'scene setting' technique in the literature of endangered language advocacy. It involves presenting alarming statistics about the large number of languages spoken in the world today and the small number likely to survive. Linguists may argue that there are anywhere between 3,000 and 8,000 distinctive languages in the world, depending on the definition of language used (Trudgill, 1991). The statistics on how many languages are at risk are equally variable and range depending on what criteria are used to assess endangerment (Nettle & Romaine, 2000, p. 9). Despite this variability, all of these enumerations assume a particular ideology of language as a bounded, identifiable and autonomous system – an ideology which depends on the assumption that languages can be individuated as a unit (Heller, 2002; Hill, 2002; Muhlhauser, 1996). The statistics most often cited are those compiled by Krauss (1992), which indicate that only 10% of the approximate 6,000 languages spoken today are likely to survive the next century (Hill, 2002, p. 127). Hill argues that this tactic of enumeration has become a central theme in media sound bites and publisher's blurbs about language loss⁴. She notes that these statistics are quoted in virtually every book, essay and newspaper article on language endangerment. The following banner from the website of the Hans Rausing Project aptly illustrates this tactic of enumeration.



It is important to note that there is a tension in this rhetoric between the effort to archive these languages and the idea that the project is allied with the efforts of speakers of endangered languages. The Hans Rausing Project's promotional literature challenges its audience with the slogan "can *your* voice help support the voices of millions?" while simultaneously claiming that their goal is in "creating an invaluable resource – and a basis for all future action." The project sits precariously between these two goals. There have been some attempts to explicitly align the goals of revitalization and documentation in the rhetoric on language loss. For example, it has been argued that creating a written form of

⁴ Hill's primary concern regarding the tactic of enumeration is that census is a gesture of power. She points out, citing Cohn, that "the enumerative modality", or the expression of knowledge as a "vast collection of numbers", was one of the major forms of knowledge in colonial regimes. She also draws on Foucault's concept of governmentality which suggests that by enumeration, people are made governable by creating statistics that can be compared with norms which are "among the gentlest and yet most persuasive forms of power in modern democracies" (p. 127).

oral languages contributes to efforts to teach the language in schools and thus to revitalization efforts more broadly (Patrick, 2003). However, it has also been acknowledged that maintenance strategies that ossify the text form of language often fail to recognize the way that oral traditions shape language transmission (Darnell, 2003).⁵ Derrida (1996) has written extensively on these disparate implications of ‘archiving’ which he suggests represent both an attempt to preserve something to be remembered and to leave out something to be forgotten.

Brosius points out that the emergence of these environmental discourses results in the creation of certain kinds of subjects. He argues that the notion of biodiversity not only constructs the threat to the environment in a certain way, but it also constructs how that threat should be ameliorated, and lays the groundwork for prescribing the role that certain kinds of actors should play (1999, p. 282). He uses the example of how the increasing concern over the destruction of the tropical rain forest has resulted in the valorization of particular categories of subject who we feel should live in them, specifically, indigenous peoples. As Brosius emphasizes, people who are excluded from this category as those who should *not* live in the rainforest are peasants and migrants from urban areas. He argues that this particular construction of the category of indigeneity often coincides with an effort to valorize communities that have previously been denied standing. Brosius claims that this process depends on the deployment of images that assert a natural connection between indigenous peoples and the environment and the dissemination of these images to a broad audience.

As in these environmental movements, there is a similar effort in valorizing communities that have historically been disregarded in the language advocacy literature and campaigns. This valorization is accomplished through the use of essentializing images. A poignant example of this imagery is a poster for the Hans Rausing Project. The photograph on this poster is of a Jiga Muguga⁶ tribesman, shrouded by greenery and decorated in white clay, charcoal and paint (this poster is also displayed at my own institution, in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto). The caption beside his head reads “What’s on his mind? You may never know.” Below the logo for the project in the right lower corner of the poster it reads, “because every lost word means a lost world”.

⁵ cf. Rukmini Bhaya Nair’s (2003) discussion of the ‘violence’ done by the script tradition in India. She argues that in rendering language visible, silent and permanent it is often appropriated as an elite form.

⁶ Note, however, that the specifics of the tribe and place are not indicated on the poster; I emailed the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) for this information.



The slogan “What’s on his mind? You may never know” implies that when the people of Papua New Guinea’s languages are lost, their thoughts will be as well. While this phrase is probably intended as a Whorfian appeal to worldview, it has the effect of making the relevant people icons rather than agents. This is exacerbated by the exotic portrayal of the speakers, who, throughout the SOAS campaign literature, are portrayed in ‘tribal’ dress and often surrounded by nature. Their website features the following variant of the image on their poster.



While the rhetoric may make clear who the relevant subjects are it is not always clear what their role is. As Bamford points out, “if the rhetoric on biodiversity is fairly uniform in treating ‘nature’ as one big shopping mall, it evinces a certain amount of confusion in knowing exactly how to situate indigenous people in the dialogue” (41). In some ways it appears that indigenous people are assigned a privileged position in the emerging rhetoric: they are given the role of ‘steward’ in charge of preserving the last remaining vestiges of biodiversity on the planet. However, Bamford emphasizes that while the position of “steward” may appear to place people in a position of empowerment, it is a position which is nonetheless replete with contradictions. She claims that contemporary rhetoric not only constructs the ‘native’ as ‘super hero’, it also has the effect of naturalizing those very people upon whom the survival of the planet supposedly depends by framing cultural difference as genetic difference (41).

The position that local people occupy in the diversity discourse as it extends to the issue of endangered languages is analogous to what Bamford describes. A common tactic in the literature on endangered languages is to present speakers of threatened languages as ‘natural allies’ of language preservationists. This is particularly striking in the repeated use of the terms ‘guardians of diversity’ (Nettle & Romaine, 2000) or ‘custodians of endangered languages’ (Hill, 2002) to refer to both their speakers and communities. These terms act to shift responsibility of language preservation solely onto the speakers of endangered languages. It also glosses the fact that while many language preservation

efforts are community generated (see Hinton, 2001; Nettle & Romaine, 2000), this is not always and certainly not necessarily the case.

The idea that a keyword tends to connect areas that are normally kept separate (McKeon, 1977) is particularly salient in arguments for the conservation of diversity. This connection is evident on a number of levels. As we have seen in the discussion above, the discourses on diversity, in both environmental conservation and endangered language discourses, forge tenuous connections between capitalism and conservation, efforts to revitalize and efforts to archive, and the simultaneous valorization and dehumanization of indigenous people.

Williams (1976) contends that keywords are sites at which the meaning of social experience is negotiated and contested (20). However, what is particularly salient in this case is how the continuous verbal identity of the keyword 'diversity' neutralizes the contradictions it encompasses. In this way, contestations and negotiations are erased in a way that highlights the hegemonic mechanism of keywords. Indeed, the notion of 'diversity' provides a new terrain on which the representation of an apparently globalized, common interest is staked out. The contestations at work here and the question of what difference diversity makes to whom is subsumed under the guise of this common agenda.

The fact that the keyword 'diversity' has unlocked a discursive space through which a globalized, common interest is articulated might also be interpreted as a response to the crisis of legitimacy of the discourse of language and the nation state. As several sociolinguists have documented, minority movements took over the very discourse of the centralized homogenous nation-states which marginalized them – and created them as a category in the first place (Heller, 1999, 2002; Jaffe, 1999). In fact, it is widely acknowledged that the ideology of languages as homogenous, autonomous, bounded units emerged as a product of the rise of the nationalism (Billig, 1995; Hobsbawm, 1990; Hill 2002). Just as the concept of a minority language and linguistic human rights only makes sense in the context of the discursive formation of the nation state, the discourse of 'diversity' is framed by the threat of capitalist economic expansion.⁷ As Heller points out, the appeal to diversity incorporates the discourse of linguistic human rights but emerges in a way that takes a slightly different shape. She suggests that the appeal to diversity can be seen as a means of preserving ethno nationalist linguistic minority movements at a time when the discourse of the homogeneous nation-state is losing credibility (Heller, 2002, p. 18).

In tracing the discursive shift signaled by the keyword 'diversity' as it has emerged in the language preservation movement, one final parallel with environmental discourses is worth noticing. Escobar (1999) has noted that in recent anthropological work aimed at articulating an 'anti-essentialist political ecology' attempts to rethink nature have, at least ostensibly, placed cultural theorists at odds with conservationists. This brings us to an important consideration. While one of my central critiques of the framework of diversity is that it construes the issue of language loss in a way that essentializes both humans and language, I am not arguing that language documentation and revitalization should not, therefore, be carried out. Instead, I hope to draw attention to the contradictions that emerge

⁷ In fact, it is interesting to note that the same scholars that brought the issue of language rights into the field of sociolinguistics in the 80's and 90's, notably Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) have now incorporated the discourse of language diversity into their work (Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove, Maffi, Luisa and Harmon, Dave, 2003).

from the rhetoric of linguistic diversity and to the ways these tensions intersect with larger ideological frameworks. I believe these discourses, and the essentialisms they produce, should be consciously interrogated. Nonetheless, it is also important to recognize that not all essentialisms are equal. Brosius (1999) makes a distinction between romantic and strategic essentialisms. He argues that at the same time that anthropologists have embraced a critical perspective, historically marginalized communities have begun to recognize the political potency of strategically deployed essentialisms. The concurrence of strategic and romantic essentialisms is complicated by the fact that, as Brosius points out, localized movements, while asserting locality, simultaneously legitimate local concerns with reference to global discourses (281). This intersection of local and global discourses has obscured the origins of representations so that it is no longer clear who is speaking for whom.

References

- Bamford, S. (2002). On Being 'Natural' in the Rainforest Marketplace: Science, Capitalism and the Commodification of Biodiversity. *Social Analysis*, 46 (1), 35-50.
- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Brosius, P. (1999). Analyses and interventions: Anthropological engagements with environmentalism. *Current Anthropology*, 40 (3), 277-310.
- Brosius, P. (1997). "Endangered forest, Endangered people" Environmentalist Representations of Indigenous Knowledge. *Human Ecology*, 25(1), 47- 69.
- Crystal, D. (2000). *Language death*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohn, B. (1996). *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India*. Princeton NJ; Princeton University Press.
- Darnell, R. (2003). Indigenous language stability and change among the Plains Cree of Northern Alberta and the Ojibwe of Southwestern Ontario. Paper Presented at the 8th International Pragmatics Association Meeting, Toronto, ON, July 2003.
- Derrida, J. (1996). *Archive fever*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- England, N. (2002). "Commentary: Further rhetorical concerns." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 12(2), 141-143.
- Escobar, A. (1996) "Constructing Nature: Elements for a Post structural Political Ecology," in R. Peet and M. Wats. (eds.), *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*, London: Routledge.
- Escobar, A. (1999). "After Nature: Steps to an Antiessentialist Political Ecology". *Current Anthropology*, 40(1), 1-30.
- Fishman, J. (2002). "Commentary: What a Difference 40 Years Make!" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 12(2), 145-149.
- Foundation for Endangered Languages. Retrieved February 28, 2004 from <http://www.ogmios.org/home.htm>
- Hobsbawn, E. (1990). *Nations and Nationalism since 1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harmon, D. 2002. *In light of our differences: how diversity in nature and culture makes us human*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Haugen, E. (1972). 'The Ecology of Language'. In S. Anwar (ed.). *The Ecology of Language, Essays by E. Haugen*, pp. 329. Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Heller, M. (1999). *Linguistic minorities and modernity: a sociolinguistic ethnography*. New York: Longman.

- Heller, M. (2002). 'Language, Education and Citizenship in the Post-national era: notes from the front.' *The School Field* XIII 6 15-31
- Hill, J. (2002). "'Expert Rhetorics" in Advocacy for Endangered Languages: Who Is Listening, and What Do They Hear?' *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 12(2):119-133.
- Hill, J. (2003). What is lost when names are forgotten? In G. Sanga and G. Ortalli (eds.), *Nature knowledge: ethnoscience, cognition, and utility*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Krauss, M. (1992). The world's languages in crisis. *Language* 68, 1.
- Jaffe, A. (1999). *Ideologies in action: Language politics on Corsica*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter
- Linguapax retrieved February 28 2004, from <http://www.linguapax.org/>
- Maffi, L. (ed.) (2001). *On biocultural diversity: linking language, knowledge, and the environment*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- McKeon, M. (1977). Review of Keywords. *Studies in Romanticism*, 16, 128-139.
- Muhlhausler, P. (1996). *Language change and linguistic imperialism in the Pacific region*. London: Routledge.
- Mufwene, S. (2001). *The ecology of language evolution*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press
- Nettle, D. & Romaine, S. (2000). *Vanishing voices*. Oxford England: Oxford University Press.
- Patrick, D. (2003). *Language, politics, and social interaction in an Inuit community*. Hawthorne, NY : Mouton de Gruyter.
- Phillipson, R. & Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1995). Linguistic rights and wrongs. *Applied Linguistics*, 16(4), 483-504.
- Rukmini Bhaya Nair. (2003). From writing on stone to e-writing in India: Linguistic scripts, cognitive parameters, cultural pluralism & information technology. Paper Presented at the 8th International Pragmatics Association Meeting, Toronto, ON, July 2003.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T., Maffi, L. & Harmon, D. (2003). Sharing a world of difference. The earth's linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, Terralingua, and World Wide Fund for Nature.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education--or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- School of Oriental and African Studies retrieved February 29, 2004 from <http://www.eldp.soas.ac.uk/home>.
- SOAS. Hans Rausing Language Project. 2003-2004 Course Handbook for MA in language documentation and Description, PhD in Field Linguistics
- Trudgill, P. (1999). *The dialects of England*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers
- Terralingua retrieved February 29, 2004, from <http://www.terralingua.org/>
- Williams, R. (1976). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, 2nd, edition. Oxford University Press.
- Wooten, J. & Iwu, M. (2002). *Ethnomedicine and drug discovery*. Amsterdam: New York: Elsevier.

Department of Anthropology
University of Toronto.
100 St. George St.
Toronto, ON, M5S 3G3
shaylih.muehlmann@utoronto.ca