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WHY LINGUISTS NEED LANGUAGES

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To an outsider, it must seem self-evident that linguists would have a key role in any investigation of the interdependence of linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity. And yet there are many professional linguists who are not concerned about diversity and its imminent reduction. This is surprising, given the situation evoked by this chilling quote:

Obviously we must do some serious rethinking of our priorities, lest linguistics go down in history as the only science that presided obliviously over the disappearance of 90% of the very field to which it is dedicated. (Krauss 1992a:10)

This chapter makes the basic but essential point that linguistic diversity is central for linguistics. There are strong cultural and moral reasons for concern about language endangerment; and there are pertinent questions about how linguists can best use their expertise for the benefit of communities whose languages are under threat (see, for instance, Wilkins 1992; Bach 1995; for an overview of the issues of endangerment see Hale et al. 1992). Here we tackle the easier question of why linguists need languages (and more than most of them realize), in a way intended to "continue the campaign" within linguistics, while at the same time giving a window for those more concerned with cultural or biological diversity on what linguists do. Before giving some examples of the potential loss for linguists, I will outline the linguistic enterprise for the benefit of the general reader and then consider the problem of data.¹

THE LINGUISTIC ENTERPRISE

One way to characterize the goal of linguistics is to say that it seeks to define the notion of "possible human language." That is certainly a challenging goal; if ever a linguist has the illusion of coming close to it (in the vaguest intuitive terms), a talk to a field linguist is usually sufficient reminder that languages are even more amazing than previously thought. The goal is also a useful one: if we could define "possible human language," this would be of value for second-language pedagogy and for speech therapy, and it would be of evident interest to psychologists, neurologists, and others.

Let me give just a few of the suggestions made for constraining the notion. For instance, Chomsky has claimed that "all known formal operations in the grammar of English, or of any other language, are structure-dependent" (Chomsky 1972a:28). This means that it is structure that matters, not numerical position in a linear sequence, which is surprising when we remember that language comes to us as a string of sound. To see what is intended, imagine we have a Martian visitor. It has good processing skills and has learned elements of English, but it cannot yet ask "yes-no" questions. Could we give instructions? If we have:

(1) Mary can speak Russian.

we might then instruct our Martian to form a yes-no question by putting the second word first (this assumes that the Martian already knows what a word is):

(2) Can Mary speak Russian?

This seems to work, as in the following example too:

(3) John is at home reading Dostoevsky.

(4) Is John at home reading Dostoevsky?

Unfortunately, our Martian will have problems with such a rule:

(5) Your friend can speak Russian.

(6) *Friend your can speak Russian?

(An asterisk indicates an unacceptable sentence.) The rule based on position in linear sequence will not do. We could try a more complex solution: the first verb is put at the front of the sentence (this requires that we explain what verbs are, or list them). Then we would obtain (7) instead of (6):

(7) Can your friend speak Russian?

With this rule our Martian could handle all the examples discussed so far, but not this one:

(8) Your friend, who is studying French, can also speak Russian.

Our rule would produce this question:

(9) *Is your friend, who studying French, can also speak Russian?

Such a question would give away our Martian as not being a native speaker of English. It might be argued that no one in their right mind would produce a question like (9); indeed not—this illustrates well just how much we “know” about language, but at a subconscious level. Even if we could not externalize the information, we know that the auxiliary in initial position in the question must be that of the main clause:

(10) Can your friend, who is studying French, also speak Russian?

This area of English syntax turns out to be far from simple. (For a helpful discussion see Smith and Wilson 1979:85–89, and for a formal account see Gazdar et al. 1985:60–65.)

It may be asked why, since no one would produce (9), anyone would discuss it. We would like to characterize and understand language, and at a more modest level to find out why (9) is impossible. People who successfully digest their breakfast are not thereby biologists, and being able to decipher these signs on the page does not make the reader an expert on vision. Simply not producing examples like (9) as speakers does not mean that we understand what is involved. After all, most humans speak a language; indeed in many parts of the world it is normal to speak several. Linguists would like to know how it is that we manage that, for what it will tell us about language, and what it will tell us about us.

Let us look more quickly at some other claims about what constitutes a possible human language. One is that syntax is “phonology free” (Pöllum and Zwicky 1988). That is to say that sentence structure is not affected by the sound shape of words. For instance, there could not be a language in which questions were formed in one way if the main verb started with a vowel and another if it started with a consonant. (Of course not, one might object, but then “of course” objects fall downwards.)

Another claim is that gender is always predictable for the vast majority of nouns (Corbett 1991:68). Note that unlike the previous two claims this one is not applicable to all languages. Not all languages have gender systems. But all that do, it is claimed, obey the constraint. To discover it means looking at languages of a particular type; many languages would provide no evidence for or against the claim.

A further typological claim, that is, one relating to language types, is the following: “No language has a trial number unless it has a dual. No language has a dual unless it has a plural” (Greenberg 1966:94). Duals are forms for two individuals, and trials are for three. Here we need to think of four language types (see table 4.1). Ngan’gityemerri is a Daly family language, found 300 miles SW of Darwin, Australia (Reid 1990); it has around 100 speakers. It has a dual and a trial.

Table 4.1 The Interrelation of Dual and Trial Numbers

Has Trial	Has Dual	
	Yes	No
Yes	Ngan'gityemerri	NOT FOUND
No	Upper Sorbian	English

Upper Sorbian, a Slavonic language spoken around Bautzen in Lusatia, has at most 60,000 speakers; all except the youngest also speak German—a reminder that Europe too has its endangered languages (on which see Salminen 1996). It has a dual but no trial. Then there is English, with neither dual nor trial. The fourth type, with a trial but not a dual, is the one which it is claimed does not and cannot exist.

Of course, this sort of claim arises only when languages with a trial number are discovered (and that means looking outside Europe and North America) and validating the claim requires us to look at a large number of languages. And though this particular correlation is not surprising, there are many other subtler ones, some explicable from “outside,” some suggestive of what goes on “inside” speakers.

DIFFICULTY WITH THE DATA

The first problem is the number of languages. Of course there are difficulties of definition and of lack of data in some areas, but many accept the figure of around 6000 for the present languages of the world (Krauss 1992a:5). (For details see Grimes, Pittman, and Grimes 1992, who have a higher figure; another source for statistical data is Kloss and McConnell 1974–1984.) It would appear that linguists have ample data, at least in principle. But if two languages are genetically related (if they are descended from a common parent), a phenomenon observed in both may be, in a sense, the same phenomenon observed twice. According to the figures in Ruhlen (1987), who reports classifications for somewhat under 5000 languages, a few families account for substantial proportions of the total number of languages, as seen in table 4.2 (note that we disregard Ruhlen's more speculative higher groupings; for discussion see, for instance, Ringe 1996). If we stick with the “splitters,” those who are most careful before accepting genetic connections,² we are still left with many fewer points of comparison than at first seemed to be the case. Moreover, the trends of language loss seem to be working almost deliberately against us. The “safe” languages are not evenly distributed: of the 250 “safe” languages, as discussed by Krauss (1992b:2), over half belong to Indo-European or Niger-Kordofanian. This means that whole families, and whole linguistic phe-

Table 4.2 The Two Largest Language Families

Family	Number of Languages	Percentage of Total (4794)
Niger-Kordofanian	1,064	22.2
Austronesian	959	20.0

nomena, are likely to die out. For instance, take Khoesan, the family in southern Africa famous for its click consonants (once considered undescribable, these can be dental, alveo-palatal, palatal, and lateral, and can be produced as voiced, voiceless, or nasal). According to Vossen (1987), there were 150 Khoesan languages and dialects some 140 years ago, of which only one-third survive today. Vossen expected that many more might die out before the end of the twentieth century.

We should also consider the New Guinea area, since “the c. 750 non-Austronesian languages spoken in New Guinea and neighboring islands provide the richest and most complex language situation in the world” (Dixon 1991:229). If we look just at Papua New Guinea, we find 50–60 distinct families and the distribution of speakers shown in table 4.3. This table is taken from a set of surveys of the world’s languages (Robins and Uhlenbeck 1991), which give an account of the differing situations in different parts of the world, based on a large number of sources.

We have seen that genetic relations are a problem for certain types of linguistic research. A second problem is areal connections. Languages that are unrelated or distantly related may still share phenomena because of contact. Thus there are features shared between the various languages of the Balkans, which the individual languages do not share with their closer relations. In such cases the languages are said to form a *Sprachbund* (see Comrie 1989:204–208). There are several such areas in the world, and again they have the effect of reducing the number of distinct data points. (From another point of view, of course, genetic relationships and areal phenomena are themselves of enormous interest, as Nichols’s [1992] work shows.)

The final type of problem I will mention here is that sometimes we wish to investigate interrelationships between features that are unusual. Very soon we run out of languages. For instance, I pointed out earlier that trial number is not found without the dual. In attempting a typology of number systems (Corbett 2000), I have been investigating all the possible systems of number values. We find the following:

SINGULAR-PLURAL. Numerous examples, such as English and French.

SINGULAR-DUAL-PLURAL. Many examples, like Upper Sorbian or Central Alaskan Yup’ik.

SINGULAR-PAUCAL-PLURAL. Bayso. The paucal is for a small number, here above one.

SINGULAR-DUAL-PAUCAL-PLURAL. A fairly common system: an example is Ungarinjin (Rumsey 1982). Here the paucal is for a small number above two.

SINGULAR-DUAL-TRIAL-PLURAL. Relatively few certain examples;³ one is Ngan'gityemerri (Reid 1990).

In addition to these, there are languages with even larger systems, comprising five number values; there is clear evidence for this in Sursurunga (Hutchisson 1986), an Austronesian language with 2700 speakers in southern New Ireland (Papua New Guinea), the closely related Tangga (Malcolm Ross, personal communication 1994), and Marshallese (a Micronesian language with some 20,000 speakers on the Marshall Islands; Bender 1969:8–9). It is difficult to establish exactly what the values are (for instance, the form usually labelled “quadral” in Sursurunga is used for groups of four and above). Given this small number of languages, the claims we make about the possible systems having five number values must be tentative.

In view of these problems, linguists have to think carefully about their samples. There is a useful literature on the subject.⁴ But at the simplest level, just as it would help the typology of number if there were more languages comparable to Sursurunga, so also much other work on language would be better or easier if there were more languages available.

THE LOSS FOR LINGUISTS

Consider first one of the many gems attributed to Anonymous:

“Life is very strange” said Jeremy. “Compared with what?” replied the spider.
(From N. Moss, *Men Who Play God*, quoted in Mackay 1977:2.)

Part of the success of modern linguistics has been to show that the remarkable diversity we see coexists with shared constraints. In other words, it shows why certain linguistic phenomena are strange. This perspective may be lost if we get too close, particularly if we always look at the same type of language. As Chomsky

Table 4.3 The Languages of Papua New Guinea

Number of Speakers	Austronesian Family	Non-Austronesian Families	Total
More than 100,000	—	3	3
10,000 to 100,000	7	30	37
1,000 to 10,000	60	240	300
200 to 1,000	40	250	290
Fewer than 200	20	110	130
Total	127	633	760

Source: Dixon 1991:245.

puts it: "Phenomena can be so familiar that we really do not see them at all" (Chomsky 1972b:24). I will describe some strange things I have worked on. Other linguists would have different but equally strange phenomena to report.

Gender

Gender is something that fascinates nonlinguists and linguists alike (Corbett 1991). And indeed, there are numerous evidently intriguing leads: Diyari, a language of South Australia, has one gender for nouns with female referents (women, girls, doe kangaroos), and the other is for all remaining nouns (Austin 1981:60). This relatively unusual system evokes for some people questions about social organization. The Rikvani dialect of Andi (a Daghestanian language) has a gender for nouns denoting insects (Khaidakov 1980:57–66). And a language from which disproportionately much has been learned about gender systems is Dyirbal, a language of North Queensland, Australia, with four genders (Dixon 1982:178–183). These are primarily for male humans and nonhuman animates, female humans, nonflesh food, and, finally, others. There are many apparent exceptions. For example, the moon is in the first, masculine gender and the sun is in the second, feminine gender. The reason is that in Dyirbal mythology, as indeed in much of Australia, the moon is the husband of the sun; in Dyirbal the role in mythology determines gender. Of these three languages, Diyari is now probably extinct, Dyirbal is approaching extinction, Andi as a whole (all dialects) has perhaps 9000 speakers.

Particularly in the nineteenth century, but continuing into the twentieth, a good deal of energy was expended on the origin of gender systems. The language considered was usually Indo-European, where the relevant data lie so far beyond reach that the topic is largely a matter of speculation. But the Daly languages of northwest Australia appear to be in the process of developing a new gender system and present a much better way of seeing how gender systems are born (Reid 1990, 1997). Unfortunately, the languages are likely to die out before the gender system is fully developed.

This case also illustrates the importance of diversity for another part of the linguistic enterprise, namely, historical linguistics. One of the ways of trying to understand the complex systems of natural language is to observe the possible ways in which they can change. The loss of a language also represents the loss of a set of changes in progress, each of which might have added something to our understanding of possible linguistic structures.

Number

A substantial proportion of the "safe" languages have an obligatory singular-plural opposition. (Hale 1997 makes an eloquent case for the importance of di-

versity, also referring to grammatical number.) Thus in English we are usually forced to choose between singular and plural whenever we use a noun. There are, however, languages for which number is less dominant, languages in which the meaning of the noun can be expressed without reference to number. We shall call such uses "general," by which we mean that they are outside the number system. In working on number systems, one of the most significant languages I have come across is the Cushitic language Bayso, which has a remarkable system (Corbett and Hayward 1987). Nouns have a special form, precisely to mark general number. Thus *lúban* 'lion' denotes a particular type of animal, but the use of this form does not commit the speaker to a number of lions—there could be one or more than that. Other forms are available, as we noted above, for indicating reference specifically to one lion, a small number of lions (the paucal) and more than that (the plural), when required. At the last count this language had a few hundred speakers, possibly as few as two hundred, and Dick Hayward (personal communication 1996) was pessimistic about its chances of survival.

Number is not used only in the straightforward way; consider this particularly unusual use in the Finno-Ugric language Mansi, which has something under four thousand speakers on the left bank of the River Ob' in western Siberia. In this language, according to the account in Rombandeeva (1973:42), noun phrases referring to two separate single but closely related items are found in the dual:⁵

- (11) *ēkwa-γ* *ōjka-γ* *ōl-ēγ*
 woman-DUAL man-DUAL live-DUAL

'a wife and husband live'

Each noun is in the dual, though there is one woman and one man; in this sentence the form of the verb makes clear that there are only two and not four people involved. The next example is comparable. (The apparent difference in the dual forms results from the form of the stem: the dual marker is *-γ* for stems in *-a* and *-e*, and *-aγ* otherwise [Rombandeeva 1973:58].)

- (12) *taw* *mis-aγ-e* *luw-aγ-e* *iŋ* *ōn's'-ij-aγ-e*
 he cow-DUAL-3.SG.POSS horse-DUAL-3.SG.POSS still keeps-PRBS-DUAL.OBJ-3.SG

'he still keeps his cow and horse'

Here the morphology on the nouns suggests that four animals are involved, whereas in fact there are only two, as the dual object agreement on the verb indicates. (For further examples, from Mansi as well as from the related Khanty [Ostyak], see Ravila 1941:14.) It is not too difficult to find languages with duals. But for the construction illustrated above, these are the only two currently spoken languages for which I have data.

velop, decay, and are lost. They can rise again in the same or other languages. But color inventories seem only to grow; this means, unfortunately, that we cannot expect surviving languages to "cycle round" the phenomenon, as they do with gender, determiners, and so on. When current languages have died out, or have lost the original color terms system, the chance to observe will have gone for good. The other clear example of this type of development is numeral systems, as shown by Hurford (1987). Again the small systems (i.e., those with few numerals) are found in endangered languages, and there too there is the threat of the importation of numeral systems from other languages. With numeral systems as with color systems, the interesting system may be endangered, even if the language as a whole is not.

We should also recall Rosch's work on the Dani (Papua New Guinea), whose color system is claimed to have just two basic color terms (Rosch Heider 1972). Rosch's results can be found in most of the introductory textbooks on human cognition; there are problems with them, but they have never been replicated. Dani and potentially similar languages are endangered, and unless the replication is attempted very soon, the intrusion of Western color terms will make this impossible.⁶

It may seem that I have tackled a narrow band of concerns here. I have chosen topics intended to be of interest without too much explanation. With a little more discussion, however, almost any other grammatical category—case, person, tense, aspect, and so on—would serve just as well.

CONCLUSION

In order to do linguistics properly, we need every last language that there is. And this is a message for linguists as much as for others. While linguists have a strong professional interest in the issue, there is a much wider concern at stake. If we want to understand ourselves, language gives away a good deal:

In the study of language, we embrace the very definition of what it means to be human and to be a developing member of the species. (John L. Locke 1993:4)

NOTES

1. The support of the International Association for the Promotion of Cooperation with Scientists from the New Independent States of the Former Soviet Union under grant 932378 "Typology of Grammatical Categories," for work on endangered languages in the Caucasus, and of Britain's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under grant R000222419, for work on number, is gratefully acknowledged.
2. See McMahon and McMahon (1995) for a helpful recent contribution, of special interest here in that they discuss explicitly the analogy with biology.

3. Some of the examples cited in the literature actually have a paucal rather than a trial.
4. Bell 1978 gives a very helpful discussion of the problems of sampling, still of considerable value. Tomlin worked on a relatively large sample, which was better justified than in some comparable work (1986:17–36). Methodology was revisited by Rijkoff et al. 1993 and in Bakker 1994:84–91. A way of tackling areal bias is discussed in Dryer 1989. For a good discussion of the different methods of sampling for different purposes, see Nichols 1992:25–44.
5. I am grateful to Hannu Tommola and Ulla-Maija Kulonen for help with these examples.
6. A project led by Jules Davidoff (involving Debi Roberson, Ian Davies and myself, funded by the ESRC) is attempting the replication with other languages with small color inventories in Papua New Guinea.

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