Ancestral languages and (imagined) creolization

ANTHONY C. WOODBURY

_____

_____

EL Publishing

For more EL Publishing articles and services:

Website:	http://www.elpublishing.org
Terms of use:	http://www.elpublishing.org/terms
Submissions:	http://www.elpublishing.org/submissions

Ancestral languages and (imagined) creolisation

Anthony C. Woodbury

1. Introduction

It is sometimes argued that the language of certain indigenous communities in North America and Australia is no longer the ancestral language, but 'Indian English' or 'Eskimo English' or 'Aboriginal English.' But are these stable, persistent, emblems of community identity, hence 'languages' just like English, Navajo, Yupik, or Warlpiri, or are they just transient phenomena, noticeable perhaps to standard-English speakers but lacking in linguistic and sociolinguistic 'focus' (LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985)? It is a question that really matters when communities and linguists must decide whether to document, teach, and promote these languages alongside, or even in preference to, the ancestral language.

In this paper, I want to discuss the question of just what to document in your own, or somebody else's community, proposing a series of alternative documentation models and their implications for local and wider communities.

2. Challenge to the descriptivists

In the 1970s and 1980s, descriptive linguists who wrote grammars, texts, and dictionaries of 'endangered languages' spoken by the elders in a community began to hear trenchant criticisms from sociolinguists.[1] These criticisms questioned the idea that 'all is lost' when a language becomes extinct. They argued that, even in situations of radical language shift, there can be significant linguistic and cultural continuity, as well as worthwhile invention and creativity.

Diana Eades, writing about Aboriginal communities in southeast Queensland, Australia, finds:

> While many Aboriginal people [sc., in southeast Queensland] may speak English as their first language, the context of conversation has significant Aboriginal cultural and social aspects which lead to distinctively Aboriginal interpretations and meanings. While the chosen language code is frequently English, there are important continuities in the ways language is used. (Eades 1988:97)

---

[1] Here I cover ground also covered in Woodbury 1993, 1998.

The Aboriginal priority on developing, maintaining, and strengthening social relationships is both reflected in, and created by, the way people speak to each other, whether the language variety is English, Aboriginal English, or Lingo [sc. any Aboriginal language - ACW]. (Eades 1988:101)

For example, Eades discusses a preference in Aboriginal English for yes-no questions without inversion, formally like echo questions but functioning as a proffering of information for confirmation. She describes this as a strategy of indirectness and links it to traditional ideas about the maintenance of privacy and about the careful regulation of information exchange in the context of specific personal relationships.

This suggests that in a situation of language shift, a language of wider communication (such as English) can be adapted ideologically, if not always structurally, to communicative ends that are continuous with those earlier fulfilled by an ancestral language. Patricia Kwachka describes rather similar findings in work on radical language shift in Koyukon communities in Alaska's interior:

A final and, I believe, a most important factor [in the rapid shift from Koyukon to English - ACW] is that the Koyukon people have been able to transfer and permute a very important cultural pattern at the discourse level, the tradition of narrative. (Kwachka 1992:70)

Although [stories from a distant time] are rarely told today, the narrative, as a social and rhetorical structure, has not only persisted but flourished. (Kwachka 1992:71)

Kwachka then speculates, "Perhaps, while semantic domains underlie and relate social, political, spiritual and economic organisation, discourse structures may well provide, quite literally, the framework for their reorganisation during language and cultural shift," (Kwachka 1992:72).

Again, the ancestral grammar and lexicon are lost, but 'language' in the wider sense, what humans do with their lexicogrammatical knowledge, is the means for continuity. Likewise, in a study of English writing by Yup'ik and Inupiaq undergraduates at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, Kwachka and Charlotte Basham found:

specific areas of English grammar have been systematically exploited to encode Eskimo social values and pragmatic perspectives...while some features of Eskimo student writing may be classified as developmental or transfer errors, a third category, which we have labeled 'qualification,' is based on an important Eskimo discourse strategy, circumspection of assertion, and that, in order to fulfill this obligatory relationship between the speaker and the universe of discourse, a process of sociolinguistic extension has occurred by which

Standard English forms have been adopted to express Eskimo functions.
(Kwachka and Basham 1990:413-4)

Moreover, some of the students in this study were not speakers of their ancestral
language, meaning that "circumspection of assertion" is not simply an effect of bilingual
interference. Kwachka and Basham go on to argue: "These [Native] writers [of English],
rather than suppressing their identity to conform to the dictates and constraints of western
essayist literature, have successfully extended their ethnicity to a new domain, shaping
their written world to maintain the pragmatic essence of their cultural perspective,"
(Kwachka and Basham 1990:426). The issue of identity is thus seen as emergent, ongoing,
and not necessarily tied to the retention of specific traditional practices.

These and related studies are examples of good documentary practice in a number
of important respects. First, they focus on actual language behaviour in contemporary
speech communities, including, frequently, records of spoken or written discourse in
context.[2] Second, they put an appropriate emphasis on linguistic creativity and adaptivity,
seeing language and communication not so much as things, but as ways and strategies.
Third, they emphasise the use of language and speech toward discursively and
ideologically framed ends or purposes, especially as this is perceived by involved
interpreters (including participants). Finally, they show concern for the maintenance of
social identity in situations of language shift, one of the key 'extralinguistic' issues likely
to be affected.

In turn, their findings of continuity in the face of language shift often send a
welcome, even empowering, political message. For example, Eades' work was carried out
in a context where claims by many southeast Queenslanders to Aboriginal identity, and
with it to Aboriginal political and legal entitlements, were being challenged. She argued
that a person could be entirely English-speaking while still being Aboriginal in outlook and
identity. More broadly, her work posed a serious critique of widespread colonial and
romantic tropes that pit the purity and fragility of indigenous culture (including language)
in its 'original' or 'natural' state against the supposed degeneracy of contemporary
indigenous people victimised and denaturalised through contact.

3. Summary

We have, then, a juxtaposition of code description and code documentation, applied to an
ancestral language, versus the documentation and description of emergent language
practice in a community.

---

[2] They often criticise standard lexicogrammatical research on ancestral languages for their reliance on
elicitation and their lack of attention to contemporary context, see Eades 1982 and Scollon and Scollon 1979.

This implies a choice between the ancestral language and the indigenous version of a metropolitan language like English, seen as an alternative target for documentation. Its emergence as a vehicle of communication, cultural continuity, and identity sends a hopeful message, and attracts ideological 'adherents' both inside and outside the community, who then treat it as a language for promotion in sociopolitical discourse and in educational settings, following a blueprint established in the minds of some, at least, by the successful 'creole emergence' of established languages like Tok Pisin and Bislama.

4. A challenge back to the 'emergent language' theorists

One implication of the Eades/Kwatchka critique is that the focus on ancestral *codes* (rather than on contemporary language practice) reflects academic agendas at the expense of 'what is going on' in communities. Some versions of the critique go further, connecting the conception 'endangered language' with nostalgic and colonialist discourses (e.g. Muehlmann 2004). But the endangered language movement has been at least as much a movement of communities as of linguists. Indeed, communities have had to press linguists to take their agendas seriously by supporting local efforts at documenting, teaching, reviving, and promoting the ancestral language, rather than, as was often the case, applying ancestral language data selectively to questions of historical linguistics, typology, and grammatical theory. Just how communities and outside linguists envision, value, and approach ancestral codes is an important question, which, when asked, is likely to turn up significant differences, as well as an appreciation of a diversity of conceptions (or 'ideologies') of language. Moreover, it is important for community members and outside linguists alike to gauge the level of interest and allegiance within a community, if any, toward an emergent variety of the language of wider communication.

Second, the Eades/Kwatchka position focuses on what is retained, but it does not focus on what may also be *lost*. Ken Hale (1992, 1998:204-212) raised this important issue by discussing Damin, a form of ritual speech in Lardil with its own special phonology and with a drastically reduced set of lexical stems bearing systematic relationships to semantic classes of lexical items in ordinary Lardil. As Hale made clear, Damin was an instance of *code-dependent expression*, where the loss of the code *entails* the loss of a culturally significant language practice. Following Hale's lead, I wrote two papers documenting the existence as well as the 'loss in translation' of two Cup'ik instances of code-dependent expression, namely the use of the rich Eskimoan demonstrative system in oral narrative, and the use of diminutive and other affective suffixes in conversation. (Woodbury 1993 and 1998). Crucially, all these arguments involve (a) a focus on natural discourse (exactly as advocated by Eades/Kwatchka) but (b) also a revaluation of the social importance of the particular (in this case ancestral) code.

Third, the Eades/Kwatcha position raises the question whether ancestral languages, and emergent indigenous varieties of metropolitan languages, are really 'languages' in the same sense. Emergent varieties are understood as developing creoles. The popular

conception is that a pidgin is 'fledged' as a creole, and hence as a 'language' like any other, as soon as it acquires native speakers. But it is valuable to look at the remarkable theoretical work of Robert LePage, which arose from his study of Caribbean creole communities, and in particular, his notion of what he called *focus*, and how it may point out an important qualitative difference between ancestral languages and emergent forms like so-called 'Aboriginal English,' or 'Indian English'. According to LePage and Tabouret-Keller (1985:205):

> each individual gives evidence of partial knowledge of a number of systems which can to some extent be defined in terms of external norms which they have identified as the properties of the group they have perceived. A community, its rules, and its language only exist insofar as its members perceive them to exist; this is the nature of linguistic competence, and no satisfactory model is yet available for its description.

In this authentically cognitive view, 'community' and 'language' have social reality only to the extent that convergent beliefs about them arise. LePage and Tabouret-Keller call this scale the degree of *focus* that a community or language may have, and use it to characterise the social and linguistic emergence of creoles (ibid. p. 201):

> the instant pidgin has all the potential creativity of pidginisation. It is diffuse, opportunistic, involves all kinds of contextual cues to convey meaning. It may rely heavily on the mutual semantic delimitation which words exert on one another in juxtaposition (i.e., on the lexicalisation of syntax) without these having to be defined in grammatical terminology; on the prosody of utterance, and on any kind of gesture such as pointing; the most basic sentence being the single word uttered with a particular experimental prosody in relation to body-language and context. As we move [along this dimension] languages become more highly focused, highly-regularised. The functions of words and the relational functions between words have been grammaticised; the grammar is to some extent context-free, the subject as well as the predicate is fully explicit and there is a sanction attached to breaking the rules in that 'the rules' are no marked by members as symptoms of identity.

Ancestral languages in small traditional communities often represent paradigm instances of highly-focused language situations, since language and community identity and norms of use have evolved according to long-accumulated convention. By contrast, we should expect indigenised varieties of a replacing language to be relatively unfocused and unstable, at least at first, and we should be aware that the acquisition of focus in time is not inevitable. Just as easily, the emergent norms that would set the indigenised variety apart could be replaced by the norms of the 'mainstream.'

The naming of 'Aboriginal English' and 'Indian English' as such implies that it is a language like any other, that is, a focussed code. But this cannot be assumed. Those making the claim, or implying it, need to demonstrate it empirically.

In summary, a concentration on the ancestral code and its impending loss cannot be dismissed out of hand as an externally-imposed agenda. Nor can the loss of the ancestral code be regarded as separate from the loss of traditional cultural practices and ways of speaking. Nor should an emergent variety of a metropolitan language be considered a highly 'focused' cultural product in the sense that the term 'language' implies, or even as names like 'Indian English' and 'Aboriginal English' imply.

5. Some alternative documentary models

At the heart of documentary linguistics is the creation of linguistic records. Those records can be used for a range of purposes: community-based social and cultural preservation; grammatical description and analysis; language promotion, preservation, and teaching. The producers of language documentation can be community members or outsiders; and they can have expertise as language teachers, production technicians, linguists, or others. They are stakeholders in the outcome of documentation projects, as are a wide range of others, including not only community members, but also those involved in local, regional, and national affairs, and those with wider humanistic interests.

What then should communities and linguists document in situations of radical language shift? What choices and models are available? And what lessons can we bring to the question from the debate portrayed in the preceding sections?

Here I will sketch out four models. Each is an archetype, so the number of on-the-ground solutions is of course greater. Nor are the models all mutually exclusive. For each model, I will consider the documentary program that defines it, what ideologies of language and speaking lie behind the model, and how likely it is to impact local communities and (local or outside) scholars.

5.1 Documentation of the ancestral code

On this model, audio and video recording is aimed at coverage of the ancestral lexico-grammatical code in its different contexts of use. A premium is placed on discourse that exemplifies a wide range of grammatical and lexical phenomena, and that exemplifies those phenomena being 'put through their paces,' for example, in speech play and verbal art, ritual speech, oratory, and conversation.

The fundamental analytical products of this type of documentation are the grammar and the dictionary, therefore elicitation and any other activities which support grammar and dictionary making are central to this enterprise and audiotaped or videotaped like any other

discourse, constitute a central part of the documentary record. In terms of coverage and aims, this is close to the 'traditional' linguistic model, however, it reflects the documentary linguistic 'revolution' in that its lexicogrammatical investigation is 'discourse-centered' (Sherzer 1990, Urban 1991).

Ideologically, one would expect that an ancestral language that is focused (in LePage's sense) is a likely potential object of both recognition and language loyalty. From a community perspective, this type of documentation supports language teaching efforts, including orthography creation, the preparation of pedagogical thesauruses, dictionaries, and grammars, and the creation of 'readers' (either written or in 'raw' audio or video form). It also supports the indigenous language as a political force, for example, in efforts to give it regional or national 'official language' status, or as a language in schools. However, a main question for the community will be: 'In what level of esteem is the language held?' And, if in low esteem, 'is there an interest in promoting the language and raising its level of esteem?'

From a scholarly perspective, this type of documentation supports all of the traditional linguistic agendas, including dialectology, historical reconstruction, linguistic typology, and synchronic theory. It is worth remarking, but not in a disparaging way, that the associated focused-language ideology is easily in the mainstream of Western conceptions of languages as isolatable systems.

5.2 Documentation of contemporary communicative ecology

On this model, audio and video recording is aimed, theoretically at least, at all talk in all contexts of use within the contemporary community. The perfect (though unattainable) result would be coverage of everything uttered over some period of time. As such, it represents a superset of all of the other documentation models discussed since each involves further selection.

The fundamental analytical product of this type of documentation is a community-oriented ethnography of speaking (Gumperz and Hymes 1964), focused not just on a single code, but revealing an overall communicative ecology where each different code and way of speaking has a place.

Ideologically, this approach bespeaks a kind of anti-ideology: Don't select, just get everything! To the extent that communities, or groups of scholars, genuinely take such a view, then it is a good ideological fit. Most people, however, are given to selection in one way or another. From a community perspective, this type of documentation supports (to some degree) the same things that narrower-focused approaches do; but in addition, supports the maintenance of authentic records of a period in the community's history.

From a scholarly perspective, this type of documentation works as a linguistic and sociolinguistic baseline study of speaking in a community. As such it realises the (broad) descriptive goals of the ethnography of speaking movement, as well as more specific theoretical issues surrounding multilingualism such as code switching, diglossia, and the sociology of language.

5.3 Documentation of ancestral communicative practices

On this model, documentation centres on communicative practices that are falling out of general use, that is, the focus is on *endangered ways of speaking.* In principle, this focuses on communicative practices in any available code: it includes for example a form of oratory or prayer in the ancestral language, but it also includes the use of a disappearing contact code (e.g. remnant uses of Russian in Alaska or Chinook Jargon in Pacific North America), a language of wider communication (as in the indigenous English cases reviewed above), or even an invented code (e.g. Damin as described by Hale).

The fundamental analytical product of this type of documentation is likely to be exigetical textual philology, discourse analysis, and (of course) the necessary lexicogrammatical analysis.

This approach is easily attached to an ideology that identifies 'language' not only with lexicogrammatical code, but with the broader matrix of language use. To the extent that teachers of introductory linguistics at US universities take pains to limit their topic to knowledge of lexicogrammatical code, and to the extent that so-called 'language-mavens' almost never so limit themselves, this is a widespread ideology. From a community perspective, this type of documentation can be centrally important in addressing the cultural loss that is felt alongside of 'language loss,' especially when language is ideologised as the broader matrix of language use. At the same time, language activists should gauge to what extent local concern about language loss does or does not extend to endangered ways of speaking not in the ancestral code. Furthermore, one may find oneself weighing documentation of endangered discourse against documentation of the ancestral code (Section 5.1), which trades away an exclusive focus on endangered discourse for a focus on the (potentially) lower-valued speech such as conversation, daily narrative, and elicitation needed for dictionaries, grammars, and their pedagogical products. Finally, community language activists often feel that well-produced examples of endangered verbal art can serve as monuments to local culture and as offerings from their community to the wider world.

From a scholarly perspective, this type of documentation (like any philological project) has a strong historical and humanistic focus: perhaps just thinking of what we have gained by our inheritance of the Homeric texts will suggest the scope.

5.4 Documentation of emergent communicative practices and – potentially – emergent language varieties

On this model, audio and video recording is aimed at emergent communicative practices and, potentially, emergent language varieties. Key to this approach is the detection and identification of such practices (whether by community members or by outsiders). The approach could be narrowed by concentrating on a particular code such as the language of wider communication, or on a population subgroup, e.g., younger people. Ethnographic interviews about speaking and speaking practices are likely to supplement the documentary evidence, and, if possible, linguistic interviews aimed at eliciting the lexicon and grammar of the (putatively) emergent code.

The fundamental analytical products of this type of documentation are both discourse data (subject to philological analysis) and, potentially, lexicogrammatical data on any emergent code. Furthermore, a combination of ethnographic and linguistic analysis should provide a basic, evidence-supported assessment of the degree of (LePagean) focus of the emergent code, indicating to what extent the rules of the code are shared in the community, to what extent they are stable (and likely to persist), and to what extent community members have an explicit consciousness about and loyalty for the emergent code.

Ideologically, such an approach presupposes an awareness of language shift and language emergence, and it thrives when a high value is placed on linguistic adaptation and invention. It is not compatible with the ideological stance that 'all codes are created equal', as discussed in Sections 1-3, since such a position requires unrealistic assumptions about the focus of putatively emergent codes. From a community perspective, this approach supports the decision to promote and seek loyalty toward an emergent variety. Typically, since ideologies of language emergence are not widespread, the value and even the existence of emergent varieties is highly contested. Those in favour are best supported when the facts suggest that the emergent language is comparatively well focused. Likewise, those against are best supported when they can show that claims for 'languagehood' are overblown, and, especially, when they can argue that the emergent code falls short in the ways outlined in Section 4.

From a scholarly perspective, this type of documentation supports inquiry into language emergence, linguistic invention, and the relationship of grammar and discourse. Likewise, it supports inquiry into questions of linguistic and social identity in settings where constructions of these values are likely to be fluid and contested. At the same time, it is important for outside scholars to be realistic when advising communities about the prospects of an emergent code and its capacity to embody ancestral ways of speaking.

6. Concluding remarks

Documentary linguistics brings people with different agendas together over the recording and analysis of speech. But for it to work, it is crucial to be aware of and respect the agendas of different stakeholders, and to understand the (often tacit) ideologies that underlie them. I hope that the four models presented above illustrate this point and can provide guidance for communities, outside scholars, and funding agencies as they conceive and assess projects. At the same time, it should be understood that my starting point, small communities undergoing radical shift from an endangered ancestral language to a metropolitan language, does not exhaust the situations in which documentary linguistics can operate. I therefore invite others to make this typology of models more comprehensive.

7. References

Eades, Diana. 1982. You gotta know how to talk...: Information seeking in South-East Queensland Aboriginal Society. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 61-82.

Eades, Diana. 1988. They don't speak an Aboriginal language, or do they? In Ian Keen (ed.), *Being Black: Aboriginal cultures in 'settled' Australia*, 97-115. Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

Gumperz, John J. and Dell Hymes. 1964. (eds.), *The ethnography of communication. American Anthropologist* 66(6): Part 2.

Hale, Ken. 1992. Language endangerment and the human value of linguistic diversity. *Language* 68:35-42.

Hale, Ken. 1998. On endangered languages, and the importance of linguistic diversity. In Lenore Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley, (eds.), *Endangered Languages: Current issues and future prospects* 192-216. Cambridge University Press.

Kwachka, Patricia, and Charlotte Basham. 1990. Literacy acts and cultural artifacts. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14:413-429.

Kwachka, Patricia. 1992. Discourse structures, cultural stability, and language shift. *International Journal of Society and Language* 93:67-73.

Muehlmann, Shaylih. 2004. Conservation and contestation: In the crossfire over 'diversity.' *Proceedings of the 12ᵗʰ Annual Symposium about language and society—Austin (SALSA).*studentorgs.utexas.edu/salsa/salsaproceedings/salsa12/SALSA12papers/Muehlmann.pdf

Robert LePage and Andrée Tabouret-Keller. 1985. *Acts of identity: creole based approaches to language and ethnicity*. Cambridge University Press.

Scollon, Ronald and Suzanne Scollon. 1979. *Linguistic convergence: an ethnography of Speaking at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta*. New York: Academic P.

Sherzer, Joel. 1990. *Verbal art in San Blas: Kuna culture through its discourse.* Cambridge University Press.

Urban, Greg. 1991. *A discourse-centered approach to culture: Native South American myths and rituals.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Woodbury, Anthony C. 1993. A defense of the proposition, "When a language dies, a culture dies". *Proceedings of the First Annual Symposium about language and society—Austin (SALSA). Texas Linguistic Forum* 33:101-129.

Woodbury, Anthony C. 1998. Documenting rhetorical, aesthetic, and expressive loss in language shift. In Lenore Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley, (eds.), *Endangered Languages: Current issues and future prospects* 234-258, Cambridge University Press