Introduction: endangered languages, endangered knowledge and sustainability

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The first three papers in this volume of *Language Documentation and Description* originated at a workshop held in February 2011 at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London on the subject of 'Endangered Languages, Endangered Knowledge and Sustainability'.

There is an increasing body of opinion that a language cannot be maintained in a discrete manner, without attention to its context: i.e. both its linguistic ecology (the languages it is in contact with) and its ecology in a wider sense: the speaker community, its domains of use, its vitality, attitudes towards it and other languages, and the physical environment. Likewise, Mühlhäusler (2000) claims that linguistic diversity is a precondition for maintaining cultural and biological diversity. The rationale for this workshop was situated in what is often called an 'ecological' approach to language planning and endangered languages, which is explored by Lenore Grenoble in her contribution to this volume, as well as in her chapter in Austin and Sallabank (2011:27-44).

In this approach, the sustainability of languages is inseparable from the sustainability of the communities that use them, linking language with wider issues such as environmental sustainability, economic and social conditions, and sustainable development. Nettle and Romaine (2000:5) summarise this neatly:

> [A language] can only exist where there is a community to speak and transmit it. A community of people can exist only where there is a viable environment for them to live in, and a means of making a living. Where communities cannot thrive, their languages are in danger. When languages lose their speakers, they die.

Environmental degradation is recognised as a factor in language shift, as it leads to migration away from areas with fragile ecosystems (e.g. sub-Saharan Africa, the Arctic) and results in increased urbanisation. Current trends are not sustainable: processes such as migration and urbanisation exacerbate language shift and are associated with the abandonment of traditional subsistence activities and do not constitute a sustainable solution to rural poverty (see Harbert 2011). Would combining language maintenance with economic, cultural and environmental development be more effective? It is claimed (e.g. by Romaine 2008) that enabling communities to remain sustainable would

reinvigorate local cultures and economies, by combining sustainable development, community empowerment and bottom-up planning.

In order for any project to be successful in the long term, it needs to be sustainable. Issues such as grass-roots participation, community-driven initiatives, and traditional knowledge have come to the fore in development studies (e.g. McTaggart 1997); such factors, long ignored in economically-driven large-scale development projects, are seen as key to sustainability in current thinking. The terms 'grass-roots' and 'self-sustaining' are thus useful criteria to apply to development and ecological stability as well as language documentation and revitalisation (Dwyer 2006; Pilgrim et al. 2009-10; Romaine 2008; Trudell 2009). The sustainability of processes and outcomes in development is also of current concern. Issues such as mass participation, community initiatives, the democratisation of development, and indigenous knowledge are also key issues in development studies (e.g. Nelson and Wright 1995; Groves and Hinton 2004). Development that is imposed from above is seen as having less chance of sustainability than development which involves the participation and commitment of the community; the parallels with current 'best practice' in language documentation (e.g. Dwyer 2006) are obvious. Sociolinguists such as Bodomo (1996) and Trudell (2009) claim that sustainable development is not possible without attention to questions such as language choice and literacy in local languages. Current approaches to development place emphasis not only on economic considerations, but also on socio-cultural factors, quality of life and well-being, as seen in the United Nations Millenium Development Goals and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s focus on 'Human' Development.[1] Since 1990 the UNDP has published an annual Human Development Report. In the 1996 report, the imposition of a dominant language is identified as a 'culturally repressive' form of development.

However, although there is an increasing amount of rhetoric on this topic (e.g. Ruíz 1984; Mühlhäusler 2000; Bastardas-Boada 2005; Romaine 2008; Trudell 2009), there has so far been little research-based evidence to support the discourses and assumptions embodied in such an approach, or to evaluate whether implementing an 'ecological' approach to language planning would be successful in maintaining either linguistic diversity and/or sustainable

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[1] http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/, accessed 11 May 2011.

communities.[2] The workshop attempted to draw together such research, and the papers in this section discuss case studies and examine issues arising.

In the search for more sustainable forms of cultural, linguistic, and environmental development, there is a growing interest in traditional knowledge and indigenous paradigms of teaching, learning, and research. Often these paradigms clash with Western scientific models which seek to impose standardised models. In her paper, Christine Schreyer argues that language planning and land planning need to be linked in order to be successful, and that traditional knowledge of place-names and land use are key to the continued use of local languages. She describes language revitalisation activities based on interviews conducted during a community's traditional land use and occupancy study. She further argues that language documentation can also contribute to sustainable development, by showing that 'community archives, no matter what their original and intended purposes, are an excellent source for language material for use in language revitalisation and maintenance projects'.

Lenore Grenoble's paper focuses on the capacity of indigenous peoples to adapt to changes in environment and lifestyle, which she identifies as a critical factor in language vitality as well as overall sustainability. As noted above, the Arctic is a fragile environment under increasing pressure from climate change. Grenoble examines the relationship between linguistic and cultural sustainability and the physical environment, showing how constructs of language, culture, history and land are intimately interwoven, and how intimate knowledge about the environment is embedded in Arctic languages. This illustrates the value of interdisciplinary research, where linguists work with non-linguists to try to tackle interlinked problems from various angles

There is a danger that focusing on such elements as traditional cultural values in harmony with natural environments, and traditional knowledge, might 'exoticise' or 'essentialise' indigenous peoples. Gary Wilson's paper acts as a counterpoint by discussing the links between economic development and sustainability in language revival in a Western setting. Until relatively recently the Isle of Man was economically marginalised and disadvantaged, and the indigenous language was seen as associated with poverty and hardship. In such a climate language shift was inevitable, and the last

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[2] See Jane Simpson's blog post (http://www.paradisec.org.au/blog/2011/04/a-noteworthy-correlation/) written on 29th April 2011 which reports that '[f]or young people in remote areas of Australia, there's a correlation between speaking an Indigenous language and better well-being.'

traditional speaker of Manx died in 1974. Wilson claims that growing economic prosperity has led local people to question such materialistic attitudes, however, and the local language is increasingly valued, as witnessed by the remarkably vibrant revival movement. While it may not be possible for all endangered language communities to follow the economic model of the Isle of Man (and not all may see it as sustainable), it does demonstrate that development can go hand-in-hand with the revalidation of local language and culture.

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