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- Article Title : Linguistic Diversity
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- Abstract: Linguistic diversity is generally perceived as declining, although the number of languages in the world, as counted by catalogues such as Ethnologue (Eberhard et al. 2023), is actually increasing year on year. This paper will consider what is meant by linguistic diversity, how it is measured and valued, why it is seen as under threat, why this matters, and to whom. The paper will trace how the concept of linguistic diversity, and discourses surrounding it, have developed over the last few decades: exploring, for example, parallels that have been drawn between language, cultural and biological diversity, and more recently with health and wellbeing. The paper will also explore the different conceptions and reactions of linguists, policy-makers, and linguistic communities: how are linguistic resources valued, what is the impact of their potential loss for academia, societies and individuals, and how it is addressed by these various actors. The paper will conclude by considering broader implications of viewing linguistic diversity through a social lens, especially in relation to the UNESCO Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022–2032) and discourses and rhetorics about linguistic diversity.
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Linguistic Diversity

Introduction: Counting the world's languages

Linguistic diversity can be defined as the multitude of different ways of expressing thoughts available to humans. These are traditionally divided into languages, identified and assigned boundaries according to their linguistic features and/or the cultural and ethnic characteristics of their speakers; they include spoken, signed and whistled languages. They are given names according to their regional, ethnic or political associations; the names and categorisations used by speakers, other groups, linguists, and political authorities may be quite different. These named languages are grouped by linguists into 'around 250 language families, with languages that use a dozen contrastive sounds, and languages that use 100' (Nettle 1999: 1). These classifications are by no means clear-cut however, and there is considerable debate about the categorisation of some varieties (Moseley 2007). As Lüpke (2016: 9) points out, 'named languages are changeable socio-political constructs, not objective entities'.

One of the most commonly cited catalogues of languages, *Ethnologue*,[1] identified 7168 living languages as of March 2023. This total includes spoken, signed and whistled languages, and has increased from 7,099 since 2019, while 'only' approximately 6000 languages were identified in 2000. Yet it is simultaneously claimed that linguistic diversity is under threat (Krauss 1992; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Crystal 2000). According to the *Endangered Languages Catalogue* (ElCat), 'Humanity today is facing a massive extinction: languages are disappearing at an unprecedented pace.'[2] *Ethnologue* adds: 'This is a fragile time: Roughly 40% of languages are now endangered, often with fewer than 1,000 users remaining.'

This apparently simultaneous increase and decrease in linguistic diversity indicates that the identification and counting of languages, and the assessment of their vitality (see below), are not simple matters. *Ethnologue*'s editors account for the increase in languages seen in its 25th edition (Eberhard et al. 2023) as follows:

> This edition drops 10 languages that were listed as living in the previous edition (4 being changed in status from living to extinct, 3 having been merged in the ISO standard into another language, and 3 having been removed because they were duplicates or could not be substantiated as ever having been a language). Conversely, 22 languages are newly listed as living (2 having been shifted in status from extinct to dormant, 5 being split from existing languages, and 15 having been added by the ISO standard as not being previously identified—8 of which are sign languages).[3]

So some additions are due to technical changes in how the count is made, while others are due to an increase in the number of linguistic varieties accorded the label 'language'. Another reason for the increase since the inception of *Ethnologue* is that signed languages are now included in the count, signalling a less discriminatory, more diverse view of language and communication.

Other catalogues of languages are available (Drude 2018), notably *Glottolog*[3] and the *Endangered Languages Catalogue* (ELCat; Campbell and Belew 2018). *Glottolog* lists 8,572 'languoids' (see next

[1] https://www.ethnologue.com/insights/how-many-languages/ , accessed 7 March 2023
[2] https://www.endangeredlanguages.com/about/ , accessed 7 March 2023
[3] https://www.ethnologue.com/about/this-edition, accessed 23 January 2023.

paragraph) at the time of writing, while *ElCat* focuses on 'over 3000 endangered languages' (see below for more on language endangerment and vitality). According to its website, *Glottolog*

> provides a comprehensive catalogue of the world's languages, language families and dialects. It assigns a unique and stable identifier (the Glottocode) to (in principle) all languoids, i.e. all families, languages, and dialects. Any variety that a linguist works on should eventually get its own entry. The languoids are organized via a genealogical classification (the Glottolog tree) that is based on available historical-comparative research. [4]

Glottolog is thus primarily by and for linguists (and also provides a comprehensive bibliography), whereas *Ethnologue* is aimed at a more general audience.[5] *Ethnologue* is used as the source of data for some other resources and campaigns, such as the Language Diversity Index published by *National Geographic*,[6] which is aimed at schoolchildren aged 14-17 and provides interactive maps to explore linguistic diversity across the globe. The Index measures diversity as the number of languages spoken in a country, to 'provide insight into the multicultural nature of countries'. None of these resources (or their discourses) are aimed specifically at language communities.

A correlation between the geographical distribution of numbers of named languages and identified biological species was first reported in Sutherland (2003), whose language figures were also based on *Ethnologue*. This was enthusiastically taken up in popular science programmes on broadcast media, and by the campaigning organisation Terralingua[7] which campaigns to halt the 'converging extinction crisis of the diversity of life in all its forms'.

Defining linguistic diversity

Harmon and Loh (2010: 100) identify three 'related (but not necessarily correlated) perspectives' on linguistic diversity from the perspective of structural linguists:

1. 'What Nettle (1999) calls *language diversity*, and [Harman and Loh] call *language richness*, "the number of different languages in a given geographical area" (Nettle 1999:10).
2. '*phylogenetic diversity*, or variation above the level of languages, such as "the number of different lineages of languages found in an area. … An area where many closely related languages are spoken therefore has greater language richness but less phylogenetic diversity than one with fewer languages belonging to several different families.' This is reflected in National Geographic's Enduring Voices project, run by Gregory Anderson and K. David Harrison based at Swarthmore University (USA)[8]: 'The Enduring Voices team's calculation of how many language families, or genetic units, are present in an area relative to the total number of languages. The higher the genetic index of a region, the more varied its

[4] https://glottolog.org/, accessed 7 March 2023

[5] although most of Ethnologue's statistics are now behind a paywall. Glottolog is administered by the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig (Germany), while Ethnologue is run by SIL International, 'a global, faith-based nonprofit … SIL's core contribution areas are Bible translation, literacy, education, development, linguistic research and language tools'. (https://www.sil.org/about, accessed 20th April 2023)

[6] https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/language-diversity-index-map/, accessed 7 March 2023. It is based on the 16th edition of *Ethnologue* and has not been updated.

[7] https://terralingua.org/, accessed 9 March 2023.

[8] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/about-enduring-voices, accessed 20 April 2023

languages.' Enduring Voices refers to areas with a high genetic index or phylogenetic diversity as 'Language Hotspots'.[9]

3. '*structural diversity*, which is the variation found among structures within languages, such as morphology, word order, phonology, and so on' (Nettle 1999:130–148, cited in Harmon and Loh 2010: 100).

Glottobank[10] is an international research consortium which aims to document and understand the world's linguistic diversity. Focusing mainly on the third of these perspectives, it established five global databases documenting variation in language structure (Grambank), lexicon (Lexibank), paradigm systems (Parabank), numerals (Numeralbank), and phonetic changes (Phonobank). The Grambank database started to release findings in 2023. It contains data on grammatical structures in over 2400 languages, incorporating 215 different language families and 101 isolates from all inhabited continents (Glottobank does not report how its language boundaries are defined or identified; see below for a discussion of this). It reports that grammatical structure is highly flexible across languages, shaped by common ancestry, constraints on cognition and usage, and language contact; discovering greater flexibility in the combination of grammatical features than theorists had previously assumed, but not without limits.[11]

Glottobank has used this data to make inferences with regard to the second perspective: human prehistory, relationships between languages and processes of language change. Linguistic phylogenetics is also used by geneticists attempting to trace the movements of early peoples, which can lead to some circular reasoning. Mufwene (2008) has challenged the 'family tree' model of linguistic evolution, placing considerably more importance on language contact effects, but Grambank found that languages show much greater similarity to those with a common ancestor than those they are in contact with. There is disagreement between linguistic typologists and sociolinguists regarding whether language contact increases or reduces linguistic complexity and diversity (Trudgill 2011; Andrason, Sullivan and Olko 2023).

Linguists, like biologists (Fitch 2011), can be divided broadly into 'lumpers' and 'splitters', self-explanatory terms that reflect the approaches adopted and evidence taken into account when assessing purely linguistic differences and similarities between linguistic structures and features.

But linguistic criteria are not the only ones relevant in language classification. Indeed, *Ethnologue* makes it clear that their identification of 'a language' is not based on linguistic criteria alone (see below). Harmon and Loh (2010: 100) recognise that 'The term "language richness" encapsulates two points: first, that speech forms can be, and routinely are, classified as discrete languages, despite the well-known difficulties of distinguishing languages from dialects [see below]; and second, that these discrete languages are countable.' They propose to 'borrow some related concepts from the field of ecology. Language richness can be thought of as being analogous to species richness, the number of species found in a given area' (ibid). They argue that 'diversity has declined much more than this because the distribution of mother-tongue speakers among extant languages has become more uneven: more speakers are becoming concentrated in fewer languages.' In other words, 'it is not only language-internal factors such as phylogenetic and structural diversity that are important' (ibid).

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[9] https://langhotspots.swarthmore.edu/, accessed 20 April 2023.
[10] https://glottobank.org/, accessed 25 April 2023
[11] https://www.mpg.de/20186271/0418-evan-grambank-shows-the-diversity-of-the-world-s-languages-150495-x, accessed 25 April 2023. The Grambank database is an open-access comprehensive resource maintained by the Max Planck Society.

While linguistic diversity as measured in this way is seen as under threat, the number of varieties of English is growing, along with calls for the recognition of 'outer circle' Englishes (Kachru 1985), chiefly used in the postcolonial Global South[12], as legitimate varieties with norms as valid as those of British, American or Australian English. Creole languages, many of which have English as a lexifier (contributing vocabulary), are also increasingly used as *linguae franca*e and are replacing multilingualism in Indigenous languages, for example in Papua New Guinea (Tok Pisin) and Nigeria. So-called Nigerian Pidgin (actually a creole since it has native speakers) is increasing in both speaker numbers and status. It been adopted as a language of the BBC[13] and promoters of its potential to be a unifying language of Nigeria have renamed it Naija (or Naijá).[14] Nevertheless, for many ordinary people it still has low status, especially compared to standard English, and it is still often referred to as 'Broken'.

So while diversity related to major international languages such as English is growing, the attractive aspects of creole languages – their relative ease of learning and their unifying function as lingua francas (or *linguae francae*) – may also entail shift away from smaller local languages. Hence, more genetically distinct linguistic diversity is being replaced by distinctiveness among creoles and 'World Englishes'.

Languages and dialects

Glottolog is careful to refer to 'languoids', side-stepping 'language-versus-dialect' debates, while *Ethnologue* provides a fairly detailed explanation of the rationale behind its definition of languages. This is based on the ISO 639-3 inventory of identified languages, which is itself controlled by SIL, which publishes *Ethnologue*.[15] According to *Ethnologue*, the ISO 639-3 standard applies the following basic criteria for defining a language in comparison to varieties which may be considered dialects:

- 'Two related varieties are normally considered to belong to the same individual language if speakers of each variety have inherent understanding of the other language variety (that is, can understand each other based on knowledge of their own language variety without needing to learn the other language variety) at a functional level.
- Where spoken intelligibility between language varieties is marginal, the existence of a common literature or of a common ethnolinguistic identity with a central variety that both speaker communities understand can be strong indicators that they should nevertheless be considered language varieties of the same individual language.
- Where there is enough intelligibility between varieties to enable communication, they can nevertheless be treated as different languages when they have long-standing distinctly named ethnolinguistic identities coupled with established standardization and literatures that are distinct.'[5]

As the explanation above indicates, identifying 'a language' is fraught with difficulties. The first criterion is further complicated by disagreements on what constitutes mutual intelligibility, as will be

[12] For a list of countries in the global South and North, see https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/global-south-countries, accessed 20 April 2023
[13] https://www.bbc.com/pidgin, accessed 14 March 2023
[14] See http://naijasyncor.huma-num.fr/ for a corpus-based study of the nature and functions of Naija (accessed 25 April 2023).
[15] https://www.ethnologue.com/methodology/#problemLgId and https://iso639-3.sil.org/ , accessed 7 March 2023

discussed further below. Mutual intelligibility is notoriously difficult to measure, as it has linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic components.

As mentioned above, a major reason for the increase in *Ethnologue*'s count of languages is the acceptance of claims for 'language' status for linguistic varieties which were previously counted as dialects, especially in response to minority ethnolinguistic groups' campaigns for recognition. This acknowledges a *sociolinguistic* understanding of what counts as 'a language', rather than attempting to measure language boundaries neutrally or non-politically, in terms of linguistic typology and/or mutual comprehensibility as is traditional in the field of Linguistics. In other words, whether a variety is designated a language or not is not only related to empirically measurable linguistic characteristics (such as degree of relatedness or difference to another language), but also to social and economic factors. It is often a matter of ideology and debate: whether users *want* to understand each other or not. The famous adage 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy', variously attributed to Max Weinreich, Uriel Weinreich, Joshua Fishman, or Antoine Meillet (Bright 1997), illustrates both the common tendency for languages to be symbols of ethnic and national identity, and for societies and centralising governments to denigrate a minority variety and deny it the status of a language (and thus constitutional rights and privileges such as access to the education system), instead denoting it a 'mere' dialect (Grillo 1989; Trudgill 1992). For example, linguistic balkanisation is in progress in the Balkans, with the break-up of Serbo-Croatian into Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, etc. (Greenberg 2004), which have then been deliberately elaborated by language planners in different directions (although there is a subsequent movement to re-unify them on a linguistic level, at least). In Scandinavia, Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish are defined as languages in relation to nation states: according to whether a language has government recognition and a standardised form (or forms in the case of Norwegian), with a history of struggles for both political and linguistic independence.

Other criteria include the existence of published grammars and dictionaries, and written material of diverse kinds, or whether a linguistic variety is studied in school and at university. Deviations from such established norm(s) are classed as dialects or, where variation has a social basis, sociolects.[16] Implicit in this is that language boundaries are created through the conscious will of speaker groups rather than objectively. Speakers of a low-prestige language variety may seek to raise its status or establish a separate identity by emphasising iconic linguistic features or 'boundary markers' which distinguish it from related varieties. This process is termed *Ausbau* [elaboration] by Kloss (1967; 1952; 1978; 1993) and *individuation* by Marcellesi (1986, 2003). Thus, non-linguistic factors such as power relations between speakers associated with socio-political groups are key.

Challenges from postmodern interpretations

Many sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists increasingly see the terms 'language' and dialect' as irrelevant and misleading, defined for linguists', missionaries' or colonial powers' convenience rather than reflecting actual language practices (much like grammar rules). European national standard languages became established through the political power or military might of the ruling group/region, reinforced by the development of the printing press that disseminated publications in

[16] See https://nordics.info/show/artikel/linguistic-variety-in-the-nordic-region (accessed 22 May 2022). However, designation as a 'dialect' (or even 'slang') is not reserved for non-standard varieties of official languages; in France, for example, any language that is not standard French can be given this label, including unrelated regional languages such as Breton, or major world languages such as Arabic which happen to be spoken by immigrants (e.g. in Bénisti 2004).

these varieties (Grillo 1989). According to Mühlhäusler (1990), linguists and missionaries exported this ideology via colonisation and established arbitrary language boundaries further afield: for example, in Papua New Guinea, a dialect that happened to be used in the area round a mission became the standard or canonical form of 'a language'. In other cases, missionaries from different cults established their own distinct orthographies for mutually intelligible varieties, and thus established them as different 'languages'. Mühlhäusler (1996) thus claims that the identification of languages, and the way they are named, are far from being an act of objective description and may constitute a serious violation of the linguistic ecology of a given area. He concludes that 'The difficulties of distinguishing between languages, dialects, communalects and such phenomena encountered by present-day linguists … do not so much reflect their inability to find these 'objects' as their non-existence' (Mühlhäusler 1996:35-6). Likewise, Gal (2006) asserts that 'languages' are a European invention, and that analysis should focus on linguistic repertoires and practices. Moreover, as will be discussed below, individuals' and communities' language practices are far more diverse and messy than might be thought from looking at over-simplistic language catalogues and maps.

It is thus not surprising that many authors prefer terms such as 'languoid', 'variety', 'code' (Myers-Scotton 1993), or 'way of speaking' (Pennycook 2007) rather than 'language'. Nevertheless, although Brumfit (2006) accepts that 'while for linguists the term "language" may have outlived whatever usefulness it ever had', he concedes that 'it retains its potency as a political construct': what Gal (2006) calls 'a convenient if dangerous fiction'. As noted by May (2004) and Patrick (2004), distinguishing oneself by linguistic differentiation continues to be of key importance for identity construction and activism by groups and individuals, as reflected in *Ethnologue*. This is related to the concept of 'strategic essentialism' coined by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Landry and McLean 1996).

Sayers (2009) and Sayers and Láncos (2017) observe that linguistic diversity 'involves two main elements: a headcount of "languages", plus variation and variability within and between them' (Sayers and Láncos 2017: 35). They argue that the recognition of some minoritised languages via policies such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages[17], which ostensibly promote linguistic diversity, in effect reproduce monolingual ideologies, especially through the standardisation of minority languages in order to comply with the established model of majority languages. Sayers and Láncos argue that this paradoxically reduces the range of linguistic diversity by misrecognising variation and variety in dialects and registers. This echoes the warning issued by Schieffelin et al (1998: 17) that

> 'movements to save minority languages are often structured, willy-nilly, around the same received notions of language that have led to their oppression … language activists find themselves imposing standards, elevating literate forms and uses, and negatively sanctioning variability in order to demonstrate the reality, validity, and integrity of their languages'.

Furthermore, Lüpke and Storch (2013), Di Carlo and Good (2014) and Lüpke (2016) argue that the diverse language practices of multilingual individuals and communities frequently defy language boundaries, challenging global Northern ideologies of languages as discrete entities that embody individuals' and groups' lived identities. People shuttle between, and mix, languages as needed for particular communicative acts, according to the implicitly understood norms of their multilingual speech communities (Madera 1996; Sallabank 2022). Similar arguments are taken further to

[17] https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=148, accessed 25 April 2023

underpin descriptions of the phenomenon of *translanguaging* (García & Li Wei 2014; Li Wei 2018), which 'refers not simply to a shift or a shuttle between two languages, but to the speakers' construction and use of original and complex interrelated discursive practices that cannot be easily assigned to one or another traditional definition of language, but that make up the speakers' complete language repertoire' (García & Li Wei 2014: 22). It reflects 'fluid and dynamic practices that transcend the boundaries between named languages, language varieties, and language and other semiotic systems' (Li Wei 2018: 261).

There is thus a fundamental disjunct between the approaches of formal/structural linguistics and sociolinguistics / linguistic anthropology. The latter increasingly look at language practices in their holistic social context, rather than at named languages as bounded entities (Spolsky 2021). As noted by Winstanley (in preparation), traditional linguistic data shows that

> language and literacy are a set of situated meaning making practices rather than codes or representations of codes. … Such an interpretation is reliant on structural understandings of languages as separate codes which can be neatly distinguished from one another and as somehow separate from practices. From the perspectives of practices, what people actually do with linguistic and semiotic resources in their day to day lives is more revealing.

In an earlier edition (2015), *Ethnologue* recognised the fluid and dynamic nature of languages and their boundaries, but recent editions have drawn back from this position, focusing on its key aim of cataloguing individual named languages and assessing these individual languages' vitality.

Linguistic diversity and language endangerment

Language shift

Language shift is the process whereby speakers of one language variety – typically smaller or minoritised ones - move to using more powerful regional, national or global languages. Language shift often takes place through a period of unstable or unequal bilingualism or multilingualism: that is, speakers use two or more languages, but one (or more) of them is more dominant, and is used increasingly widely until finally it (or they) takes over the roles previously carried by the minoritised language(s). Language shift can take place rapidly, over a generation or two, or it can take place gradually, but continuously, over several generations (Austin and Sallabank 2011: 1). Parents start using a 'more useful' language, or a language of schooling, with their children, often not realising that the children are not learning their heritage language. Or children may respond in the more dominant language, under the influence of societal pressure.

These processes are often cited as causes of language shift, but they are more accurately outcomes of extra-linguistic factors. Economic, political, social and cultural power tends to be held by speakers of larger and politically dominant majority languages, while the many thousands of minoritised languages are marginalised, until eventually only older people continue to speak the by-then endangered languages. Fishman (1991) termed this *Intergenerational Disruption.* Often language shift takes place over several generations: the oldest may be monolingual in the heritage language, or use stable multilingual repertoires; in the next generation the linguistic ecosystem becomes unbalanced and multilingual practices become unequal. The third generation may be monolingual in the dominant language, or only have latent competence in their heritage language. Dorian (1993) warns that research which only reports on the abandonment phase of a language can obscure a longer-term dynamic by overlooking reclamation efforts by later generations. Crystal (2000: 106)

notes that 'this kind of reaction [regret at not knowing a heritage language] is common among the members of a community two generations after the one which failed to pass its language on'.

Documenting endangered languages

Linguistic diversity can thus be examined from several different angles. Structural linguists focus on identifying patterns in the diversity of linguistic phenomena. Sociolinguists increasingly focus on diversity in language (or languaging) *practices*, especially as observed in (super)diverse contexts with high levels of societal multilingualism and individual multilingualism/plurilingualism. It could be argued that these angles meet in the field of language documentation, which is concerned with both recording and describing the rich variety of language practices around the world, and with addressing the perceived loss of linguistic diversity, in whatever sense.

The classic definition of language documentation (also known as Documentary Linguistics) is that of Himmelmann (1998: 161): 'to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community'. Himmelmann (2006: v) later restated this as a focus on 'the methods, tools, and theoretical underpinnings for compiling a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties'. It is interesting that the second definition reduced the scope from 'the linguistic *practices* of a given speech community' to a 'record of *a natural language or one of its varieties*' [emphasis added], in contrast to developments in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. Other documentary linguists such as Childs, Good and Mitchell (2014), Good (2018), Migge and Léglise (2014), Lüpke and Storch (2013) and Lüpke (2016) argue for a more holistic approach to language documentation that takes into account both individuals' and societies' multilingual repertoires. This would not only further the description of particular linguistic codes, but would also help to address the context and causes of language shift, which requires by definition the presence of more than one language variety, whose ecological relationships are out of balance (Grenoble 2011). A multilingual, more holistic approach to language documentation would also provide more information on the multifaceted nature of linguistic diversity: 'arriving at a holistic description and documentation of the multilingual settings of Africa and beyond is central for advancing linguistic theory in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and contact linguistics' (Lüpke 2016:8).

As explained above, counting languages is an inexact science. I am using this term deliberately, as assessments of linguistic diversity may represent attempts to shoehorn language sciences into a more precisely measurable 'scientific' (Western, positivist) format that detract from their sociocultural significance. For example, Dobrin, Austin and Nathan 2009 critique the *commodification* of languages, the 'transformation of languages from "priceless treasures" into indices, objects, and technical encodings' (ibid: 40), 'seen most clearly in applications and evaluation criteria for funding documentary research, where a selection of technological and quantitative "facts" has become a dominant theme' (ibid: 38). Some of Dobrin et al.'s analysis focuses on the measurement of documentary linguistic outcomes through 'quantifiable properties such as recording hours, data volume, and file parameters' (ibid: 41-2), but it also relates to attempts to quantify *language vitality*. Bowern (2011: 468) comments that 'Community members often also report feelings that the linguist comes in, reifies the language, turns it into a commodity, and then takes it away'.

Language vitality

Language vitality is the measure of the relative health and strength of languages (often with the unspoken assumption that the definition of 'a language' is straightforward). Documentary linguists are interested in language vitality in order to understand the processes of language shift, and also

because assessing vitality levels helps plan documentation and revitalisation programmes. As noted by Dobrin et al. (2009), some funding bodies also require justification of the need to document a particular language on the grounds of its low vitality, as well as lack of previous documentation. Grenoble & Whaley (2006: 3) assert that 'A language spoken by several thousand people on a daily basis presents a much different set of options than a language that has a dozen native speakers who rarely use it.' For example, lack of reliable data has led to situations where linguists have had to revise their plans without notice, after arriving in the field: one found approximately 30 speakers of the target language instead of the 400 expected, while another found 19 speakers instead of 20,000! (personal communication). In both these cases, the field workers had taken note of information from sources such as *Ethnologue*, which leads us once again to the question, what exactly do we measure, and how?

The early 2000s saw increased interest internationally in linguistic diversity, which was seen as part of 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' (UNESCO, no date; Minasyan 2014) and was, as noted above, perceived to be under threat. In 2003, UNESCO published a nine-parameter 'endangerment index' which aimed to measure:

1: Intergenerational language transmission

2: Absolute number of speakers

3: Proportion of speakers within the local population

4: Trends in existing language domains

5: Response to new domains and media

6: Materials for language education and literacy

7: Governmental and institutional language policies, including official status and use

8: Community members' attitudes toward their own language

9: Amount and quality of documentation.

Each of these was graded on a scale of 0-5 (except absolute number of speakers), with (1) 'Intergenerational language transmission' the overarching facet. The scope of this index was the most comprehensive yet, recognising that factors cannot easily be separated (e.g. domains the language is used in relate to attitudes), and it includes both community responses and government language policies; however, there is no guidance on how to relate the factors to each other. It became the basis of the UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (Moseley 2010 and online), another attempt to catalogue linguistic diversity.

Harmon and Loh's (2010) 'Index of linguistic diversity: A new quantitative measure of trends in the status of the world's languages', takes a slightly different approach by attempting to measure 'trends in linguistic diversity based on timeseries data on numbers of mother-tongue speakers' (ibid: 98). Based on statistics from *Ethnologue*, it assesses 'changes in the number of mother-tongue speakers from a globally representative sample of 1,500 languages over the period 1970–2005' (ibid.), finding that linguistic diversity seriously declined in this period. Harmon and Loh argue that 'while obtaining accurate projections of mother-tongue language extinctions is important, they need to be augmented by a quantitative measure of current global trends in linguistic diversity.' They add that 'Clearly, the claims of those who tout the loss of linguistic diversity as a major problem for the world would be strengthened if there were quantitative evidence to support their arguments'.

These are only a few examples of a proliferation of language vitality scales, but ultimately, all scales and catalogues are only as reliable as the data they have available. Both UNESCO's online Atlas and *Ethnologue* provide opportunities for users to update them[18], but the most common response among linguists is that while they are useful for an overall comparative perspective, the information for particular languages is inaccurate or out of date. All such indices are bedevilled by a lack of reliable and comparable data on which to base their assessments. Arguably, it would be impossible to conduct representative, accurate, comparable, up-to-date surveys for all the named languages listed by *Ethnologue*.

The key issue for the purpose of this paper, beyond that of reliability, is that although UNESCO (2003) stresses that the vitality scales are a tool for combatting threats to linguistic diversity, such scales focus on individual languages in isolation, rather than in diverse, multilingual contexts or in ecosystems. An alternative is offered by Calvet (2006: 9-10), who cites Haugen's (1972) list of 'ecological questions' regarding the status of any language:

1. How is it classified *vis-à-vis* other languages?
2. Who are its users?
3. In what domains is it used?
4. What other languages are employed by its users?
5. What internal varieties are present?
6. What is its written tradition?
7. To what extent is this written form standardised?
8. What kinds of institutions support and foster it?
9. What are the attitudes of the speakers towards this language?
10. A typology of the ecological classification situating the language in relation to the other languages in the world.

While some of these questions echo UNESCO's nine parameters, this framework goes further towards satisfying points made earlier in this paper regarding how a language is identified. It might be supplemented by other questions to address multilingual proficiency, code-switching, competence (understanding) vs. performance (using), and patterns of use of language varieties in a community's repertoire.

A parallel but earlier scholarly tradition, that of *Ethnolinguistic Vitality* (Giles et al. 1977), considers ethnolinguistic 'groups' rather than languages, collecting quantitative data via lengthy questionnaires on demographic factors, institutional support and status. In this tradition, Landweer (2000) suggested categories including:

- The extent to which a language/culture can resist influence by a dominant urban culture;
- The number of domains in which it is used;
- The frequency and type of code switching;
- The distribution of speakers across social networks;
- The internal and external recognition of the group as a unique community;
- Its relative prestige, compared with surrounding languages.

[18] The UNESCO Atlas is offline at the time of writing, undergoing a major overhaul; *Ethnologue* too promises a major revamp for its 26th edition. UNESCO no longer includes 'Endangered languages' as a category under 'Intangible Heritage'.

Social psychologists tend to equate 'group' with ethnicity, but a group could also be interpreted more inclusively as a speech community (in the sociolinguistic sense, i.e. including all language varieties used in a community). But again, collecting reliable data for all such groups is clearly unfeasible. One also has to ask, for what purpose(s) would such data be collected? Arguably, such enumerations reflect the fascination of Western positivist science for categorisation, and the resulting overviews and comparisons are mainly useful to academia. It should also be recognised that, as recognised by Brumfit and Spivak, language planners find it more useful to have specific, bounded entities on which to base policies.

Counting speakers

An issue that is (perhaps surprisingly) rarely discussed when compiling language catalogues and vitality scales is the key issues of who counts as a speaker? How proficient do they have to be? How is this measured? Do they only count native speakers? How are these defined?

Such questions become even more relevant when considering reactions from communities such as Cornish, Manx and Latgalian, whose languages were categorised as 'extinct' by UNESCO in 2009, but which are still (or once again) spoken by small but passionate communities of practice of new (second language) speakers, and in several cases neo-native speakers (the children of new speakers). 'Native-speakerism' (Holliday 2006) is rife in language documentation, as well as in language teaching, and is related to purist approaches that reject contact features and language change (Childs et al 2014; Sallabank 2018), thus again promoting a very narrow view of linguistic diversity. Documentary linguists often seek the 'ancestral code' or pre-contact variety, thought to be epitomised by the Non-Mobile, Older, Rural Male (NORM) also prized by dialectologists. They ignore the usage of younger or new speakers, which may be more creative, syncretic and diversified (Barrett 2008; Makihara 2004). Such examples of creativity in language, and the natural, inexorable growth and change of healthy linguistic varieties, which, it can be argued, lead to increased diversity, are more likely to attract censure and disapproval than approbation and acceptance (Jenkins 2007). Deviations from 'authentic' and 'native-speaker' usage are even more heavily frowned upon in small language communities, especially among older community members (Sallabank 2018).

Discourses of linguistic diversity

The start of the 21st century saw a flowering of interest in the perceived loss of linguistic diversity. Public awareness and institutional support (e.g. from UNESCO or the European Union) burgeoned, and 'popular science' publications such as Crystal (2000), Nettle and Romaine (2000) and Dalby (2002) drew public attention to the imminent demise of between 50% and 90% of the languages currently spoken in the world (the proportion cited depends on the source). Languages have of course developed, changed, grown and waned in importance, and ceased being used, throughout human history. However, it seems to have been only in the late twentieth century that the loss of linguistic diversity became a cause for widespread concern. On the one hand, such concern can be seen as a meme (prevalent idea) of late modernity, which some relate to globalisation (Robertson 1992; Trudgill 2004; Costa 2015) and the re-assertion of 'unique cultural identity' in the face of what are perceived as homogenising and assimilationist trends (Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 2-3).

Linguists consider the beginning of current interest in language endangerment to stem from a seminal panel at the annual conference of the Linguistic Society of America in 1992, where Krauss (1992) issued what has become known as the 'wake-up call' or 'call to arms' to linguists, drawing the

attention of the profession to the notion that 'the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind's [sic.] languages'. Krauss and his fellow presenters deliberately couched their papers in alarmist terms: Krauss' contribution ends '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.' (ibid.: 10).

The communities associated with those languages, were, however, already aware of ongoing language and cultural shift, and had been engaging in language revitalisation for several decades.[19] Communities may not be particularly interested in language documentation; they often have other priorities, such as water, land rights, economic, environmental or political concerns. If they are concerned about language loss, it may well be as part of a wider sense of loss of local culture and traditional knowledge. Increasingly, links are also being made between language maintenance, wellbeing, and development (Hallett et al. 2007; Romaine 2008; Henderson et al. 2014).

It is possible to discern a series of 'waves' in interest in, and discourses on, linguistic diversity since the 1980s. These waves are not necessarily diachronic – all are still in evidence – and nor are they fully separable; a movement, organisation, or social actor may simultaneously express more than one trope.

First wave:

When I began my doctoral research in 2002, I was surprised to find that speakers of the endangered language Guernesiais (Guernsey, Channel Islands) were not aware of other languages in similar situations, or of the loss of linguistic diversity worldwide, which at the time was receiving considerable media coverage. Some of my informants, who were experiencing language loss as a traumatic and painful process, found it heartening to hear of other language revitalisation efforts, and of funding bodies dedicated to documenting endangered languages. Others, however, expressed little or no interest: 'What do they know about here? What do they know about our language?'. Such reactions demonstrate more interest in *subjective ethnolinguistic vitality* (Currie and Hogg 1994), i.e. the situation of one's own language, than in linguistic diversity worldwide. Early language revitalisation movements tended to be what Steger (2003, discussing anti-globalisation activists) called 'Particularist protectionists', interested in protecting traditional ways of life and ethnic/local distinctiveness in their own locality or community. Steger described such activists as 'more concerned with the well-being of their own citizens than with the construction of a more equitable international order' (Steger 2003: 114-5). Thus, language movements focused mainly on particular languages; if they made links with others, it was usually within the same language family or ethnic grouping: e.g. Celtic languages, Polynesian languages (especially Māori and Hawaiian, pioneers of 'language nest' early years immersion programmes).

Second wave:

Academics responded to the 'call to arms' in 1992 mainly by documenting and describing languages, in order to preserve knowledge of unique forms of expression. In some cases one of the stated aims was to be useful for language revitalisation, especially the production of dictionaries and other language materials; however, formal linguists rarely have training in producing materials aimed at language learners and non-specialist audiences, and their outputs often require interpretation for

[19] In both cases I am referring to relatively recent iterations; language documentation had been carried out in the 19th century by missionaries, and in the early 20th century by Boas, Sapir and others, while Lach-Szyrma drew attention to the imminent demise of Cornish and Manx in 1888.

non-linguists (Austin and Sallabank 2018).[20] Like the first wave of language activism, language documentation tended to be carried out on individual languages in isolation, by 'lone wolf' linguists (Crippen and Robinson 2013), who avoided interdisciplinary collaboration and what Newman (2003) called 'linguistic social work'.

The discourses promulgated by these researchers tended to be fairly essentialist (Duchêne and Heller 2007; Errington 2003). For example, Grimes (2001) claimed that the disappearance of a language means the extinction of a unique creation of human beings that houses a treasure of information and preserves a people's identity. Languages were described as intangible cultural heritage, a store of knowledge for (a) linguistic science and (b) humanity as a whole, rather than belonging to their speaker communities (Hill 2002); 'saving' these languages was described as urgent.

Similar discourses are still extant, as seen in Lena Herzog's film *Last Whispers*,[21] released in 2021 to celebrate the UNESCO Decade of Indigenous Languages (see below). The film won numerous awards, and raised awareness about the loss of linguistic diversity, but it perpetuates 'exoticising' and 'totalising' discourses (Duchêne and Heller 2007; Errington 2003), for example by not naming or acknowledging the speakers whose words are quoted (or whose data is mined/appropriated: Holton et al. 2022). Its website cites 'Facts' about loss of linguistic diversity which replicate the discourse trope of languages being a treasure for humanity as a whole:

> Each of these vanishing languages expresses the unique knowledge, history, and worldview of its speaker community, and each is a distinctly evolved variation of the human capacity for language. Many of these languages have never been described or recorded, so their loss means the richness of human linguistic diversity is disappearing without a trace.

The film is built around a soundscape that focuses on the silencing of *languages*, ignoring or erasing the speakers and their communities. The enumeration of '7000 languages' is also accepted uncritically. Stephen Levinson, Director emeritus of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen and one of the founders of the Grambank project, is quoted as stating:

> The extraordinary diversity of languages is one of humanity's greatest cultural endowments. This endowment is under threat, especially in some areas such as Northern Australia, and parts of South and Northern America. Without sustained efforts to document and revitalise endangered languages, our linguistic window into human history, cognition and culture will be seriously fragmented.[11]

Second Wave discourses are thus alive and well, as also demonstrated in the Glottobank project mentioned earlier.

Third wave:

The third wave of discourses about linguistic diversity can be divided into an academic strand and an activist/community strand. The academic strand stresses collaborative, interdisciplinary research, criticising the 'lone wolf' research approach and promoting decolonising research ethics (e.g. Leonard and Haynes 2010; Bowern and Warner 2015). For example, Battiste & Henderson (2000: 132-133) observe that:

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[20] In North America workshops are held by the National Breath of Life Institute for Indigenous Languages to train community members to access archival language records: https://mc.miamioh.edu/nbol/, accessed 20 April 2023

[21] https://www.lastwhispers.org/, accessed 25 April 2023

> Ethical research must begin by replacing Eurocentric prejudice with new premises that value diversity over universality. ... academic disciplines have been drawn from a Eurocentric canon ... that supports production driven research while exploiting Indigenous people, their languages, and their heritage.

These linguists seek to collaborate with an activist/community strand that takes a 'universalist protectionist' approach (in Steger's terms) and stresses intersectional issues such as gender, racism and Indigenous rights. This wave attempts to make common cause and promote grass-roots links between minoritised communities and language activists (Garaio and Penman 2021). The strands are linked by increased recognition of Indigenous and activist scholars, one of whom, Davis (2017), provides an illuminating critique of rhetorics used in academic and public discussions of Indigenous language shift.

In response to continuing concerns (or discourses) about loss of linguistic diversity, UNESCO held a Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL) in 2019. At the time of its launch, another Indigenous linguist, Leonard (2019), expressed concern 'that IYIL will reproduce the same power structures and colonial logics that have fostered the language "disappearance" trend that it purports to counteract'. He claimed that 'the IYIL is framed around an endpoint of languages "disappearing," which is anchored by a dangerous colonial logic that erases the presence of contemporary Indigenous peoples'.

While the UNESCO Year of Indigenous Languages was deemed a success, it was clear that more action was needed, so the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-32) was launched, to 'help promote and protect Indigenous languages and improve the lives of those who speak and sign them and contribute to achieving the objectives set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'.[22] Its rhetoric makes more links to human rights than its 2019 precursor, but it still presents generic, exoticised, anonymous images of Indigenous people, and seems to stress that the main worth of Indigenous languages lies in their contribution to the sum of human knowledge:

> Indigenous peoples are not only leaders in protecting the environment, but their languages represent complex systems of knowledge and communication and should therefore be recognized as a strategic national resource for sustainable development, peacebuilding and reconciliation. … Indigenous languages add to the rich tapestry of global cultural diversity. Without them, the world would be a poorer place.[17]

It can thus be argued that UNESCO's discourses are still at the second wave and have not yet quite embraced the intersectional, rights-based approach of the third wave of linguistic diversity discourse.

Conclusion: Decolonising and deglobalising diversity

Multilingualism is the norm in the world as a whole; for example, Lüpke and Stoch (2013), among others, have illustrated multilingual practices in heterogeneous linguistic environments typical of many African settings, where individuals have large and adaptive linguistic repertoires. Yet Western essentialist and monolingual ideologies dominate, so that a balanced, multilingual linguistic ecosystem has come to be seen as aberrant; linguistic diversity is associated with poverty in the global South, and with a lack of economic opportunities (Harbert et al. 2009).

[22] https://idil2022-2032.org/, accessed 25 April 2023

Public-oriented rhetoric on the loss of linguistic diversity often draws parallels with the loss of biological diversity. As pointed out in Sallabank (2012), focusing on parallels with the loss of biodiversity and its unthreatening, cute connotations may lead to over-simplification, or even sanitisation, of the causes of language endangerment. In an attempt to counter such discourses, linguistic anthropologist Gerald Roche stated overtly in a tweet in 2019:

> How to save an endangered language & stop it from dying:
>
> 1. Realise that the lang isn't endangered. It is stigmatised, marginalised, oppressed.
>
> 2. Realise that the term 'dying' is completely unhelpful.
>
> 3. Stop trying to save the language. Fight the oppression of its speakers.[23]

However, focusing on oppression and hegemony may be less palatable to audiences in the Global North, or to governments or funding organisations (Dobrin et al. 2009; Cameron 2007).

At the same time, 'colonial entitlement' can be perceived in the relationship of academics from the global North with linguistic diversity. Diversity of all kinds is usually seen as clustered in the global South,[24] and linguists and anthropologists from universities in the global North see it as their right to conduct fieldwork in exotic locations and to collect or mine data from local populations. When seen through this colonial lens, linguistic diversity is only safeguarded if it is recorded, analysed, described according to the Western norms of linguistic science, decontextualised and preserved in archives in the global North (Bowern 2011; Dobrin et al 2009). As pointed out by Leonard (2017:15),

> the field of Linguistics may inadvertently reinforce its colonial legacy (Errington 2008) when researchers produce their work around linguistic rather than cultural units, categorise and theorise Indigenous languages using norms for major global languages, or default to Western constructs of what 'language' is when engaging in Indigenous language research, teaching, and advocacy.

This has led to considerable debate about the colonial legacy of Western research on Indigenous peoples (e.g. Smith 2021; Hill 2002). The field of documentary linguistics is coming to recognise that the 'lone wolf' model of fieldwork 'on' a language/community is outmoded and unethical (e.g. Grinevald 2003; Dwyer 2006; Bowern and Warner 2015; Leonard 2017; Crowshoe et al. 2020), although this model still dominates academic funding (Dobrin et al. 2009).

The tendency to decontextualise languages from their linguistic and social ecosystems is also being challenged. A swathe of studies from South Africa is demonstrating the value of recognising

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[23] https://twitter.com/GJosephRoche/status/1204582968745844737, accessed 25 April 2023. Roche has since founded the Global Coalition for Language Rights which stresses the 'intersection of digital, human and linguistic rights' and promotes 'opportunities for linguistic empowerment' rather than focusing on tropes of disappearance and loss.

[24] For example, *Ethnologue* states 'Asia has the most indigenous languages, closely followed by Africa. Combined, they account for nearly 2/3 of the world's languages' (https://www.ethnologue.com/insights/continents-most-indigenous-languages/, accessed 9 March 2023). Maps produced by Terralingua 'compare the geographic distribution of the world's biodiversity with that of the world's languages' and 'showed for the very first time that there are strong correlations in the global patterns of distribution of the two diversities' (https://terralingua.org/our-projects/biocultural-diversity-toolkit-terralingua/measuring-biocultural-diversity/measuring-linguistic-diversity/, accessed 9 March 2023). In such counts, the linguistic diversity of Europe, especially its minoritized and endangered languages, is systematically under-represented.

students' translanguaging practices for overcoming racialised educational disadvantages (e.g. Makalela 2015; Banda 2018; Probyn 2019; Sesale et al. 2020; Tyler 2023).

There is thus a need for a more nuanced understanding of diversity, informed by anthropological theories of porous group boundaries and fluid identities, as well as by Indigenous research paradigms and minority-majority concepts of power relations. Interdisciplinary forums such as this journal issue are therefore valuable for raising awareness of a diversity of approaches and discourses on diversity.

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