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At its annual meeting in Minneapolis this year, the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) celebrated its 90th birthday. Among the various events marking the occasion were two symposia, one focusing on the development of various sub-disciplines in linguistics (phonetics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, and so on) and the other on the evolution of the society over the last nine decades (materials for both can be found at: <http://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/2014-annual-meeting-90th-anniversary-presentation-materials>). I contributed to the latter with a presentation entitled, “Linguists’ work with endangered languages.”

The research for that presentation brought to light two particularly noteworthy themes. First, from the outset of the LSA until the present, there has been a consistent—and persistent—agenda to promote the analysis of lesser-studied and endangered languages. This is, of course, a theme that also echoes the bias of *Linguistic Discovery*. However, the fact that the LSA has had this agenda does challenge the perception that the field of linguistics in America has devalued and ignored language description at the expense of abstract theorizing or that the field has concerned itself only with data drawn from widely spoken and widely studied languages until recently. The second theme is that the very concept of an “endangered language” as an ontological category is a relatively recent development. The notion creeps into linguistic parlance only in the 1970’s, enters into the discipline of linguistics in the United States in full-force in the early 1990’s and now has become accepted as a useful analytical concept. As that concept has gained traction in linguistics, it has produced some noticeable enhancements to the LSA agenda to promote research on lesser-studies languages.

In this paper, I provide a written, and somewhat refined, version of my LSA presentation. I make three basic claims. First, the Linguistic Society of America, through the research agenda of its members, has been involved with the study of endangered languages from the society’s inception. Second, in some notable ways, that research agenda has not changed dramatically in the past 90 years. Third, there have been enhancements to that agenda which reflect broader changes in the field of linguistics, most obviously a broader global focus in research on minority languages and a greater degree of theorizing about the process of language shift. These enhancement get reflected in a variety of ways, not least in some organizational changes to the Linguistic Society of America.

1. The Early Days of the Linguistic Society of America

The very first issue of *Language*, the flagship publication of the LSA, contains a manifesto for the society (Bloomfield 1925) by one of its founding members, Leonard Bloomfield. Through his work on Algonquian languages in the 1920’s and 1930’s, Bloomfield established himself as one of the leading scholars on Native American languages of his day. It comes as little surprise, then, that he also developed an acute awareness of the shrinking speaker base for Native American languages and, consequently, saw the urgent need to undertake descriptive work on these languages. Characteristically for Bloomfield, he framed the need in terms of the potential negative impact on the science of linguistics and writes in the manifesto:

“The more direct harm to science is too obvious to need exposition; one may mention the American Indian languages, which are disappearing forever, more rapidly than they can be recorded, what with the almost total lack of funds and organization.” (Bloomfield 1925:4)

Much more can be inferred about attitudes towards research on endangered languages in the early days of the LSA by looking at the work of one of its most active and visible members—Franz Boas (Figure 1).

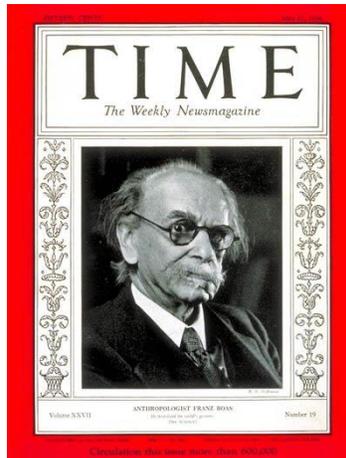


Figure 1: Franz Boas on the cover of *Time* (May 11, 1936)

Boas, often described as the father of American anthropology, could also, arguably, be heralded as the father of documentary linguistics in America (Woodbury 2003). He and his students (e.g. Kroeber, Sapir, Haas, Reichard, Bunzel) provide a large percentage of the articles in the early decades of *Language* that focus on endangered languages, and this just a tiny portion of their broader corpus of descriptive and theoretical work. Boas himself was the fourth president of the LSA, as were several of his students (Sapir in 1933, Kroeber in 1944, Haas in 1963). When one includes the students of these students, (e.g. Morris Swadesh and Willima Bright), Boas’ direct and indirect impact on American linguistics, endangered language research, the contents of *Language* and the shape of the LSA is even more remarkable.

Much could be said about this impact, but for present purposes I underscore three of Boas’ philosophical commitments that have become so broadly espoused in the field of linguistics that one hardly recognizes they were not, and are not, self-evident. First, Boas was committed to the notion that all languages are of equal value, and that the study of any language has inherent benefits to all humans. As he puts it, languages have the:

‘...power to make us understand the roots from which our civilization has sprung, to impress us with the relative value of all forms of culture, and thus serve as a check to an exaggerated valuation of the standpoint of our own period, which we are only too liable to consider the ultimate goal of human evolution, thus depriving ourselves of the benefits to be gained from the teachings of other cultures, and hindering an objective criticism of our own work’(Boas 1904:524)

Second, Boas acknowledged that language has a certain ephemeral quality to it, and as result, scholars (not to mention speech communities) could not take for granted the continued existence of a language through time. While some of the impermanence stems from the truism that language is never static but constantly changing over time and space, Boas also had in mind the transitoriness of language that derives from language shift. In a letter to Toni Cultee, the sister of one of the last speakers of Kathlamat (a dialect of Upper Chinook), Boas writes:

‘What I now collect. . .exists only in the mind of a single man...a curious thought to exhaust the last of a people and, just as Bastian says, to preserve at the eleventh hour all their tales, customs, etc.’ (Cole 1999)

Third, and obviously connected to the first two philosophical commitments, Boas was a champion of language documentation. In 1917 he inaugurated what has been the primary publication outlet for research on Native American languages, *The International Journal of American Linguistics*. The very same year (1927) that Boas was elected to its presidency, the LSA was admitted into the American Council on Learned Societies. It was under the auspices of the ACLS that the Committee in Research in the Native American Languages was formed to “secure an adequate record of Indian Languages and dialects, and to take such other steps as seemed desirable and practicable for furthering the study of native American languages.” (*ACLS Bulletin* 1928:53). Under the leadership of Boas, along with other luminaries such as Edward Sapir and A. L. Kroeber, the committee (which later became the Joint Committee on American Native Languages) went on to stimulate a number of documentary efforts to gather materials on the languages of the Americas (Boas’ own collection of materials was later indexed by Charles Voeglin and Zellig Harris as a supplement to *Language* in 1945).

What is striking about these three aspects of the Boasian ideology—the equality of languages, the temporary nature of linguistic knowledge and the pressing need for documentation—is that all are so recognizably familiar in contemporary linguistics. Significantly, they each are fundamental to the rationale for the study of endangered languages, and indeed, to make that research a priority for the field.

2. Attention to Endangered Languages—Similarities and Differences over Time

The previous section has already made the case that attitudes about work on endangered languages have not changed all that much in the last 90 years. At least looking at the activities of the LSA, an additional case must be made that the relative degree of attention to endangered language has not changed significantly over time.

One finds, for instance, very similar kinds of comments being made about language vitality in the pages of *Language*. “The language of the Chitimacha Indians of southern Louisiana is now practically extinct. Although there may be as many as a hundred Chitimacha Indians living in Saint Mary’s Parish, Louisiana, practically all of them now speak French or English or both and only two individuals remember the old language” (Swadesh 1933). Fast forward six decades and the same sorts of demographic observations are being made: “Evenki is spoken by roughly ten thousand people spread throughout Siberia. Many Evenki living in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) have had heavy contact with the Yakut language, just as the speech of those living in Buriatia shows a significant influence of Buriat...most fluent Evenki speakers are over fifty, and

all are multilingual.” (Whaley, Grenoble, & Li 1999:294). The awareness of language attrition, and its importance in underscoring the need for research on particular speech varieties, is clearly nothing new.

In a similar vein, there has been no appreciable trend in the number of articles that focus on endangered languages, at least in *Language*, which I take to be at least somewhat representative of the field of linguistics in the United States (Figure 2).

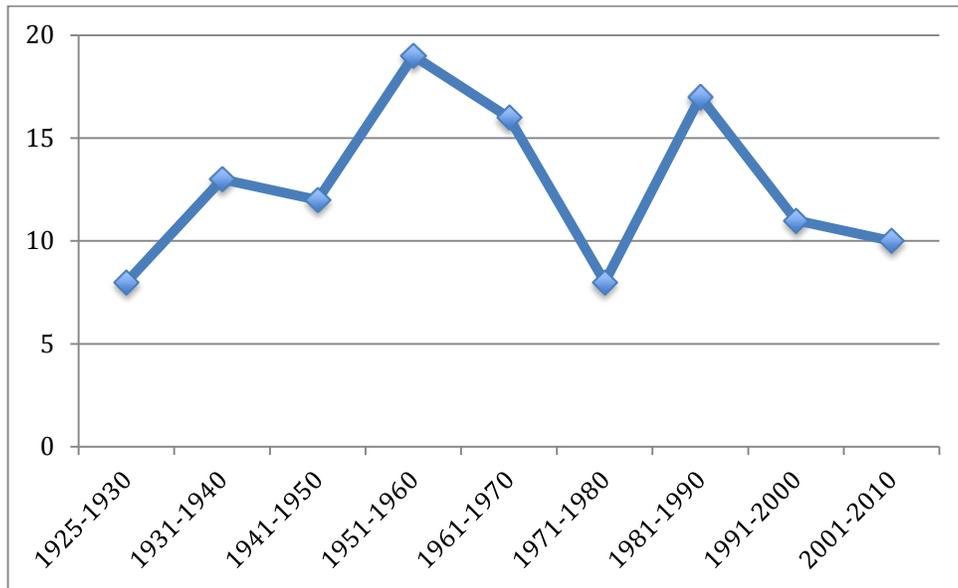


Figure 2: Number of *Language* articles on endangered languages by decade

There is no consensus on a technical definition of what constitutes an “endangered language” (see Whaley 2003 for a fuller discussion), and, indeed, the term only came into currency in the 1980’s. For the purposes of the count provided in Figure 2, I employed the conceptual scheme of Krauss 1992, and included both languages that are “moribund” (i.e. languages that are spoken but not being learned as a first language by any child) and languages that are “endangered” (i.e. languages that are not an official state language and also those that are spoken by 100,000 people or fewer). Because the absolute number of articles is not great for any one decade, a count based on a different conception of an “endangered” language would likely have a noticeable effect on the overall tally for a specific decade. It wouldn’t, however, alter the fact that the slope over time remains largely the same.

While awareness of decreasing language vitality in many language communities and the scholarly attention paid to such languages has remained consistent over the past nine decades of linguistics in the United States, there are some things about work on endangered language that have changed. First, there is an appreciable growth in attention being given to languages spoken outside of North America (Figure 3).

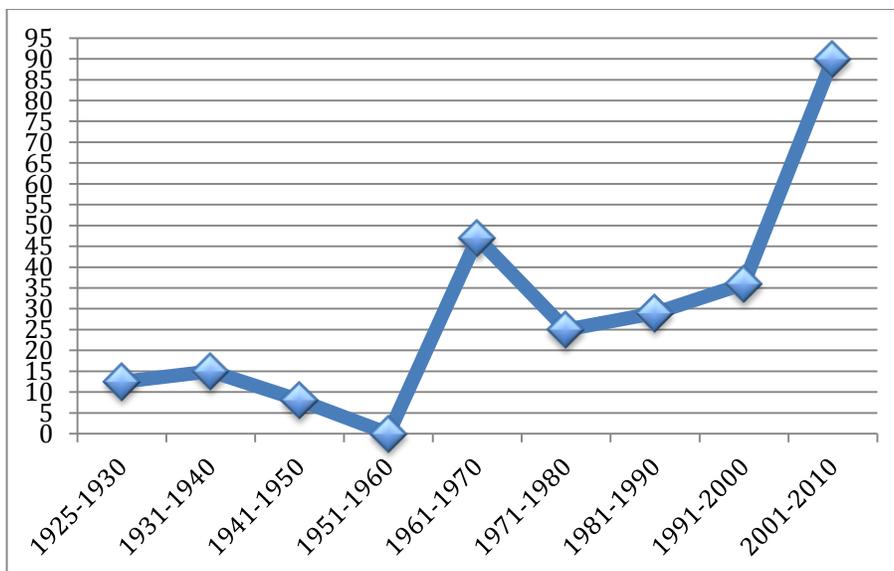


Figure 3: Percentage of *Language* articles on endangered languages outside of North America

The trend here, though calculated specifically in terms of endangered languages (using the same notion of “endangered” as with Figure 2), is not unique to endangered languages. I take it to be a byproduct of broader move in American linguistics away from a predominant interest in Indo-European linguistics (largely diachronic in focus) and American Indian languages and towards a more geographically distributed set of languages and theoretical interests that depend on data from a broader variety of languages.

A more substantive development has been the emergence of endangered languages as an analytical category used broadly in the field of linguistics. Prior to the 1970’s, the phenomenon of languages having declining numbers of speakers, and in some cases becoming moribund or extinct, was, as we have seen, well known. However, such languages were not treated as a distinct linguistic group that prompted unique theoretical issues, required particular research methodologies or warranted specialized vocabulary. However, beginning in the 1970’s, this begins to change. Once again, we find this reflected in the articles of *Language*. In 1973, one finds the very first article in the journal that raises the question of whether languages that are experiencing the disappearance of a speaker base present unique properties (Dorian 1973). More specifically, Dorian argues that the processes of language change differ. By 1988, one finds the first explicit use of the expression “endangered language” (Eastman 1988). And in the 21st century, this trend towards greater theorizing around endangered languages reaches maturity with a steady output of articles dealing with different facets of this newly established research enterprise: documentation (Bird and Simons 2003), revitalization (Dobrin 2008), ethics of fieldwork (Dobrin 2009 and other papers in the same volume) and forecasting the future of languages (Whalen and Simons 2012).

A final notable change over the past 90 years in linguists’ work on endangered languages, perhaps the most conspicuous change, has been the emergence of an advocacy for the preservation of linguistic diversity and support for language maintenance and revitalization projects. A catalyst for this development was an LSA symposium held in 1991 that led to a set of articles in *Language* 68 (Hale et al. 1992). Taken as a collection, the articles served to highlight the remarkable rate at which linguistic diversity is currently shrinking, to argue that the loss of linguistic diversity is harmful to the scientific enterprise (an echo back to Bloomfield), to

suggest that linguists have a professional obligation not only to document endangered languages but to help maintain or restore their vitality, and to prioritize the needs of speech communities in making decisions about data collection and dissemination. Arguably, it was this volume of *Language*, more than any other publications before it, that stimulated the current intensity around endangered language research.

In concert with the symposium and consequent publication, the LSA also formalized an agenda around endangered languages by establishing a new organizational unit in 1992: the Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation (CELP). According to its charge, CELP (<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/about/who-we-are/committees/endangered-languages-and-their-preservation-celp>) exists with the two-fold purpose of raising awareness about the rapid loss of linguistic diversity and to encourage research on endangered languages. In the explication of this charge, the move from the early days of the LSA with a more restricted focus on documentation and analysis, to a larger agenda what includes activism becomes clear. Through CELP, the LSA works to “assist the maintenance and revitalization of language varieties.”

In considering how linguists’ work on endangered languages has changed over the past 90 years, we have seen that in some ways the answer is “not all that much”. Using the lens of the LSA to examine the question, I have argued that an awareness of language obsolescence, concern about how it affects the field of linguists and the amount of publication on endangered languages has not changed significantly. In other ways, however, the answer must be “quite a bit”. There has been an appreciable move towards a more global focus, the development of several new subfields/research areas within linguistics that stem, directly or indirectly, from accepting “endangered language” as an analytical category, and a professional ethic of advocacy on behalf of speakers of endangered languages has emerged.

3. The Future of Research on Endangered Languages

During the rich discussion period following my presentation at the LSA, I was asked what changes I anticipated in research on endangered languages going forward. In academic circles, one rarely finds good prognostication about the direction of a field when the time horizon gets beyond a decade. The world and the world of ideas changes too quickly and unpredictably. If the past is any guide here, however, I think it is safe to predict that there will be a continued desire on the part of linguists to gather data from as wide of variety of languages as possible, and within that activity, there will continue to be a bias towards research on languages who are most vulnerable to becoming extinct. That bias, of course, has always been and will always be in tension with the realities of access to speakers, funding, political sensitivities and the relative degree of ease for the individual linguist to do fieldwork.

I also think it is reasonably safe to claim that the extremely robust discussion on documentation and archiving will continue. As technology changes, and as new questions arise within linguistics, there will be a need to rethink how best to document information about languages and how to make information available to others.

What is less clear to me looking forward is whether the amount of theorizing about endangered languages will grow, level off or shrink. As the number of revitalization programs around the world grows, there certainly will be a need to examine their degrees of success, develop a more sophisticated notion of best-practices, and to refine our knowledge of how one can maintain or revitalize language use. There is a need for critically evaluating forecasts of

language moribundity and extinction. Much more could be discovered about unique process of internal and contact-induced change in language attrition situations. Indeed, there are many still-to-be explored questions that could be asked about the category of “endangered languages.” However, it is an open issue in my mind whether these areas of inquiry will yield enough new insights for the broad field of linguistics to maintain the relatively high degree of prominence it has given to research on endangered languages over the last 25 years.

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