

## Endangered Language Linguistics: Whose Mission?

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The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge and explore the relationship between academic and mission linguistics, focusing on their main areas of overlap, language documentation and fieldwork. Our orientation is forward-looking: to consider the implications of this relationship for the future of basic linguistic research. The simple proposition we take as our starting point is one that some linguists are unaware of, while still others take it for granted: *that there are institutionalized dependencies between academic linguistics on the one hand, and Christian missionary organizations and their products on the other*. Linguistics is unique among academic disciplines in this being so.<sup>1</sup> The topic is a sensitive one that some might rather avoid in the interest of maintaining a mutually comfortable status quo. But for a number of reasons that we will try to make clear, the time is ripe for the community of academic linguists to reconsider its own role in sustaining this status quo.

As the organizers of this collection (and the LSA symposium where most of the papers were first presented), we wish to emphasize that our desire to address these issues in no way arises out of negative experiences we have had with mission linguist colleagues or with a particular body of mission-sponsored research. To the contrary, like many other field linguists, we have benefited enormously from mission expertise, infrastructure, and personal assistance in the field (for Dobrin, the New Guinea north coast, where the Arapesh languages are spoken; for Good, rural and urban Cameroon). We are deeply grateful for the advice and generous practical

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<sup>1</sup> Though see Burton and Burton for the suggestion that an ethnographically-based anthropology might never have developed were it not for “a supporting cast of missionaries” (2007:214).

assistance of colleagues working with SIL International (henceforth SIL) in our field regions, some of whom we now count among our friends. Both authors have relied on SIL in a number of ways in carrying out our primary research: use of *Ethnologue* and previously collected word lists; library access, transportation, accommodations; even foreign currency exchange at the best rate in town. But we can hardly imagine our research without access to these mission resources, and it is precisely this awareness that leads to our present concern.

We start on this personal note in order to satisfy our readers' curiosity and then leave the matter behind, because we are convinced that this discussion cannot proceed productively if it is framed in terms of individuals. As a discipline, we have tended to maintain a focus on individuals' motivations and particular research results, yet this 'safe' position has been utterly unhelpful in guiding our reflection: when we take great pains to respect individual differences of opinion we end up being able to say very little.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, a focus on individual professional choices draws our attention away from the larger institutional structures that powerfully shape that set of choices in the first place.

Reconsidering linguistics' dependence on missions is in no way meant to detract from the tremendous impact mission work has had on academic linguistics. The first language descriptions we have for some parts of the world are the legacy of missionary linguists (for the Americas see, e.g., Hanzeli 1969, Haas 1978, McKevitt 1990). Many typologically significant features of non-western languages were first made known to linguistic science through the work of early European missionaries, and mission linguists still provide an important source of data for typological and theoretical research today. The inclusive/exclusive category, an important

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Grenoble and Whaley (2006:196), writing on mission linguists and language revitalization, can say only that "one finds mixed reports and differing attitudes... about the appropriateness of a missionary-linguist's involvement in a community." Similarly, the chapter on ethics in Dan Everett's (forthcoming) field manual ends with the unhelpful summary statement that "missionaries are at once people and an issue. There will be times that either opposing them or befriending them could be appropriate in particular circumstances" (ms., p. 259).

structuring dimension of many of the world's pronoun systems, is one well-studied example of a grammatical phenomenon originally “discovered” by missionary linguists (Haas 1969, Mannheim 1982); the more recent documentation of object-initial word order is another (Derbyshire 1977, Derbyshire and Pullum 1979). In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mission linguists’ practical need for dependable linguistic field methods dovetailed with academic interests in scientific reliability, leading to the development of standard methodologies or “discovery procedures” that reached their greatest elaboration and sophistication in the handbooks of Nida (1949) and Pike (1947) and that continue to inform the teaching and analytical practice of university linguists. In 2005 the set of IPA symbols was expanded for the first time in over a decade on the basis of evidence provided by an SIL linguist, Ken Olson (IPA 2005, Olson and Hajek 1999).

But academic linguists sometimes express concern that mission projects work counter to the goal of supporting cultural and linguistic diversity, and not only in the most obvious ways of being associated with colonialism, or replacing the linguistic forms used in indigenous religions. Even ostensibly constructive mission-sponsored language development and literacy projects are “moulded along Western lines” (Pennycook and Makoni 2005:152). Mission literacy work cannot help but emphasize specifically Christian values surrounding reading and writing, often prioritizing the former over the latter, and encouraging readers to seek the truth inherent in texts (Schieffelin 2000).<sup>3</sup> Missionization invites subtle changes in people’s cultural assumptions about how the process of speaking itself works, for example towards the alignment of speech with inner beliefs that is valorized by western Judeo-Christianity (being truthful, nonsecretive, and so on), though such assumptions are by no means universal (see, e.g., Ochs Keenan 1976, Rosaldo 1982, Robbins 2001).

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<sup>3</sup> See Kirsch 2007 for discussion of other standardizing reading practices in global Christianity.

Until now, academic linguistics has benefited from—and reciprocally justified—its mission counterpart without much deliberation. But with the contemporary rise in concern over language endangerment, the time has come for us to reflect on how this partnership of convenience can be reconciled with academic linguistics' own priorities and values. As we redouble our efforts to document, understand, and support the world's linguistic diversity, academic linguists are taking a renewed interest in fieldwork. There are more numerous and generous sources of funding for endangered language research and language development projects. Documentary linguistics, which takes the collection, preservation, and basic annotation of linguistic data as its key aim, is emerging as a subfield of its own (Himmelman 2002, Woodbury 2003). Endangered languages have become a moral cause, with language preservation now often understood as a matter of human rights.

In refocusing attention on language documentation and fieldwork, academic linguistics is reconfirming its dependence on tools, information, and facilities created by missionary institutions, particularly SIL. Of course, like fieldworkers from other disciplines, academic linguists regularly appeal to missions for logistical assistance in the field: making contacts and selecting a fieldsite, arranging housing and transportation, learning about the culture, etc. But secular field linguists also use fonts and keyboarding tools distributed by SIL in order to digitally encode the material they collect, and many depend on SIL-produced software such as Shoebox to organize and store their data. The sociolinguistic situation of many languages is known to western linguists only through the results of SIL-sponsored surveys and disseminated through the authoritative voice of the *Ethnologue*, SIL's global language inventory.<sup>4</sup> SIL linguists have taken a leading role in the current development of standards for endangered language documentation;

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<sup>4</sup> This point of dependence has even been noted in the popular press; in 2005 the *New York Times* published an article in the Science Times entitled "how linguists and missionaries share a bible" (Erard 2005).

indeed, the language codes used by SIL's *Ethnologue* have now been adopted as an essential component of an International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standard for language identification. (We return to this contentious matter below.)

Academic linguistics increasingly shares SIL's interest in languages—and peoples—on the margins of modernity and world power. Nevertheless, the two institutions' goals remain distinct. Academic linguistic concern is primarily with languages: how they are constituted, how they function, what they reveal about the cultural worlds of their speakers, what they reveal about being human. For mission linguistics, by contrast, language is primarily a tool. And whatever tools missions use—analysis, translation, orthographies, literacy, computation—these are subordinate to the goal of evangelization: presenting (or in many parts of the world now, reinforcing) a particular set of religious beliefs and practices, and encouraging others to embrace them as their own.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that individual mission linguists are not motivated by a fascination with language just as secular linguists are. As stated at the outset, the motivation of individuals is not in question. But it does mean that the *institutional value* mission organizations place on linguistic work is aligned with their own, rather than the academy's, goals.

Academic reliance on mission-sponsored resources is thus underwritten by no guarantee that those resources will continue to be supported should mission priorities for any reason be transformed. For example, SIL has phased out the popular lexicon and text analysis tool *Shoebbox* despite its widespread adoption by academic linguists.<sup>6</sup> One reason given for doing so is to allow the organization to turn its “attention to translation-related tasks for which there have been fewer

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<sup>5</sup> It is only in terms of this prioritization that we can understand such statements as these from SIL/Wycliffe promotional materials: “Media tools are like salt, making people thirsty for God's Word” (JAARS 2001), or “God created computers for missions. He just lets the rest of the world use them” (Wycliffe Bible Translators 2004).

<sup>6</sup> SIL has been developing FieldWorks Language Explorer as a Shoebbox replacement, though at present it only runs on Microsoft Windows (<http://www.sil.org/computing/fieldworks/flex>).

computer solutions” (SIL 2007), such as rendering complex non-Roman scripts (Byfield 2006)—a much lower priority for most academic linguists than lexical and grammatical analysis.

But the divergence of missionary and academic linguistics is nowhere more apparent than in the diminishing deployment of mission linguists to those languages that are least vital, so least in need of vernacular language religious materials. After all, “[b]ecause SIL linguistics personnel generally commit 10 to 20 years of their lives to living and working within specific indigenous people groups for the purpose of facilitating language development projects,” such projects are only started where they “are likely to remain viable to the end” (Landweer 2000:5). As a result, the languages that are most endangered are less likely to receive SIL’s close attention. Yet these are precisely the languages that academic linguists now deem most urgently in need of documentation. In 1994 the LSA issued a statement on the need to document linguistic diversity, with “highest priority given to the many languages which are closest to becoming extinct” (Linguistic Society of America 1994). Increasingly SIL has been training local people (“nationals”) to work in these circumstances, particularly through sister organizations like the Bible Translators Association in Papua New Guinea, Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy, Translators Association of the Philippines, etc. But despite “friendly ambiguities of language” (Sapir 1949 [1932]:516) like the SIL term “local teams,” what most nationals are doing under the auspices of these sister organizations is producing religious materials in practical orthographies, and sometimes local literacy materials, typically for languages that are closely related to those already being worked on by SIL personnel, rather than the kind of extensive language documentation that is most useful for cultural preservation and informative to linguistic science. They are certainly not doing anything close to what the authors of the LSA statement had in mind.

Given these systematic divergences, we might ask whether it is desirable—or even possible—for documentary linguistics, and hence the core of the endangered language research paradigm, to proceed effectively in an academic setting without the support of mission-based infrastructure. Academic linguists have begun asking themselves this question in light of the 2007 adoption of the three-letter *Ethnologue* codes as a central component in an official ISO standard for language identification, and the concomitant establishment of SIL as the registration authority overseeing the codes' update. There is increased need for such a machine-readable coding system as more linguistic resources become digital, and a reliable means is needed for searching and collating this digital language data. ISO granted SIL, a missionary organization, authority over the international linguistic standard because the academy was able to offer them no adequate alternative. The *Ethnologue* is simply the closest thing that exists to a comprehensive list of labels for all the languages of the world. Even before their adoption by ISO, the *Ethnologue* codes had already become the *de facto* standard, not only for individual linguists, but for major digital language archives and funding programs. So officializing the codes has had little effect on academic practice. It has, however, made explicit the uncomfortable fact that the academy has virtually no authority in an area central to all linguistic research: “What are the languages of the world?” When asked this question, it is SIL, and not academic linguistics, which is able to answer. One need not have any ethical problems with SIL's missionary practices to be taken aback by this observation.

How did it come to this? The answer seems clear: The institutional structure of academic linguistics has inhibited the kinds of efforts that would be required to create such a comprehensive catalog. Academic linguists are constrained by the need to produce timely, original publications, whereas a work like *Ethnologue* is a long-term community-wide effort

pooling many people's knowledge. Developing an inventory of the world's languages has hardly been a valued intellectual endeavor in a discipline that only emerged as an independent academic entity with the rejection of taxonomy. And then there are the financial realities. Mission linguistics derives its income from donations by Christian evangelicals who are committed to reaching community after community "until the whole world knows." Academic linguists, on the other hand, have only recently begun investing real resources in the notion that every last language really and truly matters.

So far, only one academic organization has officially acknowledged the matter of the language codes: the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas (SSILA). SSILA has resolved to form a Board of Indigenous American Language Designations to coordinate efforts to improve the accuracy and coverage of the current code set under SIL auspices, and to initiate a dialogue with ISO that would allow the codes to be amended independently of SIL (SSILA 2006). SSILA neither supports nor condemns SIL's missionary activities. It does, however, recognize that a standard is not secure until it enjoys a consensus among the full range of its users, something the *Ethnologue* codes do not at present have (Epps et al. 2006, Aristar 2006, McLaughlin 2006).<sup>7</sup>

For academic linguistics to move toward self-sufficiency in this one area—to say nothing of others—would be a major undertaking. It would require collaboration on the part of the whole field, and would ideally be supported by funds from a number of nations and scientific foundations. Some of the individuals contributing expertise to the project would no doubt be mission linguists. But then both the power and the responsibility for shaping our intellectual

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<sup>7</sup> Of the 266 ISO 639-3 code change requests posted for the first cycle (see [http://www.sil.org/iso639-3/chg\\_requests.asp](http://www.sil.org/iso639-3/chg_requests.asp)), only eleven (i.e., a mere 4%) were submitted by non-mission sources (individuals who are not SIL affiliates, New Tribes Mission affiliates, etc.). Four of these eleven were submitted by Anthony Aristar, in his capacity as manager of the LINGUIST List's catalog of ancient languages; two were for constructed languages. This does not strike us as the participation profile of an accepted international standard.



resources would be more equitably distributed—more ecumenical.<sup>8</sup> But even if the community of academic linguists were to take on this ambitious project, the larger question remains: are we investing adequately in the kinds of infrastructure needed to fulfill our scholarly obligations, now and in the future? This seems an important question for academic linguists to be asking, now that they are finding themselves inadequately prepared for even the administrative aspects of maintaining a set of language codes.<sup>9</sup>

The question of our dependence on mission resources arises in a climate of heightened concern with professional responsibility that we are experiencing in linguistics today, in large part growing out of the endangered language research agenda. We have been moved as a discipline to act out of a sense that it would be wrong to “obliviously preside” over the disappearance of our subject matter, to use Michael Krauss’s memorable phrase (1992:10). The renewed interest in fieldwork is bringing us into contact with speakers who are more assertive, invested, and knowledgeable than ever before, and who are placing their own expectations, limits, and aspirations on the work we do in their communities. And for many linguists, both mission and secular, a growing understanding of the social and economic forces driving language shift has led us to see our work in small, minority, and indigenous language communities as addressing an issue of human rights (see, e.g., Nettle and Romaine 2000). Reflecting this same climate of concern, the LSA is acting on recommendations by the Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation and forming an ethics body for the first time in the organization’s history.

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<sup>8</sup> Preliminary discussion towards a new academic model of handling language cataloging and identification took place at the meeting, “Towards a Comprehensive Language Catalogue,” held in June 2007 in Leipzig, Germany. See <<http://linguistlist.org/issues/18/18-1807.html>>.

<sup>9</sup> For example, it is unclear how the academy could employ the staff of the registration authority. At present it is SIL that covers the expenses associated with maintaining the code set.

But the developments brought about by the endangered languages movement cast the relationship between academic and mission linguistics in yet a different light. Academic linguists now find themselves converging with missions in seeking to bring about social change through their work—revitalizing languages, empowering speakers, and advocating on behalf of speech communities (Silverstein 1998). And even though many academic linguists understand their work as informed by a moral agenda entirely different from that of missions, mission linguistics does present a model we can learn from. The mission agenda leads it to stress the human dimension of linguistics. The mission project is a collective one. Mission linguists work in an institutional atmosphere of mutual support and commitment to common goals. Their interactions with speakers are not narrowly constrained by their technical interests, so that they find themselves offering people help and hope in numerous ways that extend well beyond issues of language. Indeed, it is to SIL's medical as well as moral interventions that we can attribute the organization's success in revitalizing a number of endangered languages in Amazonia and Melanesia (Cahill 2000). So however critical some may be of them, missions have made it a core part of their methods to cultivate enduring, multifaceted relationships with communities of speakers, an approach which figures centrally in their humanism and indisputable success. In the 1990s Papua New Guinea instituted major educational reforms to promote the use of its hundreds of vernaculars in the early years of schooling. And SIL was right there, signing up to help with the work of training teachers and creating materials for use in those schools. Last year Papua New Guinea's postal service, Post PNG, issued a series of stamps commemorating SIL's 50 years of work in their communities (Post PNG Limited, n.d.). At present it seems inconceivable that the work of academic linguists could be acknowledged in this way. But perhaps with time that may change.

To conclude, let us underscore the three key positions that have guided this discussion. One is a focus on academic linguistics' own role in perpetuating an imperfect, if comfortable, status quo. The mission project will surely carry on whether one criticizes or praises it, so the important question to be asking ourselves is not what the missions should be doing, but what *we* should be doing to create a stable setting for our field, and whether it is really in our interest to continue our dependence on an institution with an agenda that diverges substantially from our own. In thinking about these questions, we are orienting ourselves toward the future, which we stand a chance of affecting, rather than toward the irrecoverable past. Finally, by examining not the unassailable choices of individuals but rather the deeply entrenched institutional framework within which those choices are made, we hope to draw the community of linguists into a constructive dialogue about the moral and practical configuration of the discipline at a historical juncture when fieldwork and language documentation are of greater importance than perhaps ever before.

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