

Introduction to special issue of *Romanitas* 4 (2), May 2010.

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Today many languages are in danger of vanishing from the face of the earth (Nettle, 2000). Due to the increasing power of a small number of languages spoken by large, hegemonic populations with social prestige or control of economic resources, “smaller” languages are being lost at a rapid rate. Wurm (2001) considers that nearly half of the more than 6,000 existing languages of the world are condemned to perish in the foreseeable future, and he provides a comprehensive list of the endangered languages in his *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*. Crystal (2000) is even less sanguine about the likely outcomes of language competition, shift, and loss, estimating that only some 600 languages will survive.

Language death detaches people from their cultural heritage and leads to loss of community identity. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) sees the process as a form of linguistic or cultural genocide with far-reaching implications for human rights. The dominant culture is also deprived of the diversity that is the foundation of human cultural creativity, knowledge, and change (Dalby, 2003; Harrison, 2007). Like the loss of biodiversity (which frequently precedes it), the loss of linguistic diversity has very serious consequences for the future of humankind, since it means the obliteration of centuries of oral traditions and the cultural knowledge they contain (see Terralingua at <http://www.terralingua.org/> and Maffi 2005 for more details).

Fortunately, linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists, indigenous leaders, and others are rising to the challenge and fomenting projects to reverse language decline (Hinton & Hale, 2001). There are projects all around the world dedicated to raising language awareness in endangered speech communities, documenting languages that are on the verge of disappearing, facilitating language reacquisition and revival, and supporting local efforts to establish bilingual programs, literacy programs, and other forms of language rescue. UNESCO has documented numerous cases in its online Register of Good Practices in Language Preservation, a project whose objective is to “identify, document and disseminate past and current practices that have proven to be successful in safeguarding languages and language communities” (see details at: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00145>). The hope is to use this register to provide a bank of innovative problem-solving techniques and solutions for individuals and organizations attempting “sustainable language preservation”.

This special issue of *Romanitas* was conceived of in the same vein, although circumscribed to the Romance world because of the specific scope of the journal. It is a collection of ten articles reporting on language endangerment or death and on preservation or revival projects in speech communities where a Romance language is a

factor. The language that is in danger may be a Romance variety, an indigenous language, or an immigrant language that is threatened by a dominant Romance language. The articles are arranged by the speech community they discuss, in geographic order from north to south, starting with France and the European Community, continuing through Spain, Mexico, Honduras, Aruba, Curaçao, Venezuela, Brazil, and ending with Chile. They approach their speech communities of interest via historical linguistic, sociopolitical, ethnolinguistic, sociolinguistic, and applied linguistic methodologies. With the exception of one article which deals with the historic displacement of Leonés by Castilian in the 13th century, they all address languages that are currently struggling to maintain themselves in the face of powerful odds.

The first article, that of Romain Colonna, is titled “Pour l’autonomie des espaces langagiers en contexte plurilingue comme garantie de la promotion et relance des langues.” It attempts to define and analyze the spaces in which threatened languages may be utilized and the possibilities for rescuing and preserving them to assure their survival. Colonna, a researcher at the University of Corsica, examines both political and social aspects of the rescue of minority languages within multilingual spaces (primarily European). He concludes that multilingualism both serves and runs contrary to the interests of minority languages, depending on the political and social variables considered. He advocates the conservation of autonomous monolingual spaces for such dominated languages.

Vicente Marcet Rodríguez of the University of Jaén in Spain traces in detail the historical process of Castilianization of the language of the ancient kingdom of León in his article titled “Cronología aproximada de la castellanización del dominio románico leonés.” Utilizing more than 700 medieval texts drawn from three collections representing the eastern, central, and western dialects of the region, Marcet Rodríguez analyzes the progressive replacement of eight phonological and graphemic variables of Leonés by Castilian elements during the 13th century, when Castile established its supremacy on the Iberian peninsula and promoted Castilian as a means of facilitating the exercise of its powers. This process responded to concrete political, geographic, and economic factors that left the other languages of Spain in the position of being “dialects” with very limited outreach. The disappearance of characteristically Leonés features did not take place rapidly or homogeneously. By the last third of the 13th century, the eastern part of León was quite Castilianized; however, the central and western parts of the kingdom took a few more decades to complete the shift. This historical case demonstrates what can happen to some endangered language varieties today, although more quickly, given technological advances that circulate language changes more efficiently than the ancient scribes did.

In the third article, titled “El léxico disponible del catalán de Valencia: Hacia la necesaria planificación lingüística de una lengua minoritaria,” María Begoña Gómez Devís and Francesc Llopis Rodrigo of the University of Valencia in Spain utilize the lexical methodology pioneered by Humberto López Morales in Puerto Rico to present

important data regarding the contact between Catalán and Spanish in Valencia. Their sample consists of 464 Valencian students aged 6-17, products of bilingual Spanish/Catalán schools, who fall into three groups: Spanish-dominant bilinguals, balanced bilinguals, and Catalán-dominant bilinguals. The objectives of the study are to determine the nature of the lexical repertoire of the students as well as to classify the types of language contact phenomena discovered in these repertoires. The overarching goal is to strengthen language planning initiatives that have not succeeded, despite considerable effort and good intentions, in detaining lexical impoverishment in the Catalán of these students. This approach could easily be applied to many other speech communities in the process of language shift.

Martha Mendoza, of Florida Atlantic University, in her article, "The Effects of the Linguistic Contact between P'urhepecha and Spanish and the Efforts to Revitalize an Endangered Mesoamerican Language," describes the history and present status of P'urhepecha, a complex indigenous language isolate spoken primarily in the state of Michoacán in central-western Mexico. P'urhepecha has been in contact with Spanish since the 16th century, and there has been mutual lexical influence between the two languages. However, the number of speakers and the territory in which P'urhepecha is spoken are sadly reduced. The language exists as the low variety in a diglossic relationship with Spanish, and the goal of local bilingual educational programs is transition to Spanish. Mendoza is currently involved in the creation of pedagogical materials and a bilingual dictionary aimed at revitalizing the language in the face of ever-increasing non-reciprocal bilingualism and shift toward Spanish dominance.

Santiago Ruiz, an ethnographer currently at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras, questions Western theories of language shift in "Language transmission in a Garifuna community: Challenging current notions about language death." In Honduras, while Garifuna adults utilize their native language among themselves, they employ a conscious strategy of rearing their children in Spanish to protect them from humiliation in Spanish-medium schools. Then in adolescence, the youngsters are encouraged to develop their Garifuna skills to become fully-functioning members of the adult community. Scholars like Joshua Fishman have claimed that vertical transmission of the native language is necessary to ward off or reverse language shift and eventual loss. However, Ruiz argues for an enlarged conception of language maintenance which includes vertical, horizontal, and diagonal transmission within large extended families. He also points to the rising group of well-educated Garifunas who are activists for bilingual programs that respect Garifuna language and culture and may create the conditions under which the current language defense strategy may be rendered unnecessary.

The sixth article, by Kevin Carroll, is titled "Examining perceptions of threat: Does an influx of Spanish speakers pose a threat to Aruban Papiamentu?" It discusses the historical development of the creole known as Papiamentu in Aruba and the effects of its contact with Spanish. Carroll, professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico in

Mayagüez, utilizes a case study approach to the historical examination of Aruban language policy and planning, utilizing archival data and interviews with important figures in the movement to maintain and promote Papiamentu. He stresses the vital role that immigration has played in the linguistic formation of the multilingual island population and the powerful impact it has had upon Aruban nationalism. He also makes the important point that every new wave of immigration has stimulated a reconsideration of what it means to be Aruban. The recent influx of Spanish speakers has had the salutary effect of raising linguistic awareness as Arubans rally around Papiamentu as a group identity marker and the negative effect of stimulating anti-Spanish rhetoric and nourishing a mistaken fear that Spanish will displace Papiamentu.

Víctor Vázquez, graduate of the doctoral program in Caribbean Languages and Literature of the English Department of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, takes an optimistic view of the future of Papiamentu in Curaçao in his article titled “Papiamentu: A ray of hope among the creoles of the world.” Vázquez gives an overview of the life cycle of this creole to reveal how it developed during the colonial period from the confluence of Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, and a variety of African languages and how it became the vernacular has escaped language death due to certain socio-historical factors and to many community and institutional projects which have conserved the language and enhanced its role in Curaçaoan society. He urges a closer study of the historical trajectory of Papiamentu in order to utilize it as a model for other Creoles that are struggling for definition and maintenance in a modern society.

JoAnne Ferreira, professor at the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine in Trinidad, documents a little-known branch of the French Creole of the Lesser Antilles which arrived in Paria, Venezuela from Trinidad. Her article titled “La historia y el futuro del patuá en Paria” indicates that the “patuá” has less than 100 speakers left, almost all of them elderly Spanish-speaking Venezuelans. Nevertheless, there has been a recent revival of interest on the part of descendants and researchers in preserving it as a heritage language to be taught in some schools. It would then serve a folkloric function of marking Afro-Caribbean identity much as calypso music, cricket, and certain foods already do in Venezuela. She describes in detail three large-scale encounters (in 2005, 2008, and 2009) of historians, anthropologists, linguists, cultural scholars, musicians, storytellers, native speakers and their descendants, and students of “patuá” to celebrate the language in workshops, classes, and musical performances and to obtain community input into a census and the establishment of a standard orthography. Her epilogue provides information regarding recent school policy changes that favor the teaching of the “patuá” and give hope for its future preservation.

In the ninth contribution to the volume, Peter Petrucci of Massey University in New Zealand and Katsuyuki Miyahira of the University of the Ryukyus in Okinawa, Japan tackle the topic of the maintenance of the Okinawan language in Brazil. Their article titled “Language preservation in a transnational context: One Okinawan community’s efforts to maintain Uchināguchi in São Paulo, Brazil” takes a panoramic and historical

look at the situation of a language which is not mutually intelligible with Japanese, is endangered in Japan, but is still spoken in diasporic communities in Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina, despite considerable historical prejudice toward its speakers. The article is based on textual documents and face-to-face or Skype interviews with members of the São Paulo Uchināguchu community who have established classes to assist in reviving and preserving their language variety via podcasts, CDs, and DVDs. Such heritage language preservation efforts are being scrutinized closely by language planners in Okinawa and Hawaii, since mutually beneficial projects could be developed in terms of teacher recruitment, teacher training, orthographic standardization, and materials development. New transnational identities are being created through the limited yet symbolic use of the language in rituals and in the performing arts. The authors contextualize the Okinawan efforts by comparing them to similar efforts among the Rotumans of Australia and the Garifunas of Central America.

The tenth and final article of the volume, “Mongeley kam mongelelay chi mapudungun waria mew? Vitalidad y representación social del Mapudungún en Santiago de Chile,” written by a research team headed by Cristián Lagos of the University of Chile, looks at the situation of an indigenous language once its speakers settle in an urban center. The Mapuche language is in general decline in Chile in all domains (both in terms of number of speakers and degree of fluency). However, this tendency is even more pronounced in Santiago where the Mapuche (literally “people of the land”) do not own land and are part of a heterogeneous work force that utilizes Spanish. Lagos and his team utilize qualitative and quantitative measures to create an ethnolinguistic profile of the language vitality and competence of the Mapuche along with the social representations they have constructed for their language in this new setting. They argue successfully that the Mapuche have created a new form of “being Mapuche” in the capital in which the language serves primarily symbolic functions as an identity marker. They also point out that conflicting efforts by linguists to arrive at a writing system may have been in vain, since the real problem is not writing per se, but rather lack of basic knowledge of linguistic structures and absence of legitimate social spaces in which to use the language.

The ten articles we offer our readers are quite heterogeneous in their methodologies and scopes; however, they all share an overriding concern with the fate of minority languages. It is our hope that they awaken interest in this pressing matter and stimulate concrete action so that at least some of these languages receive the support they richly deserve.

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