Turning the tide from language endangerment to ethnolinguistic vitality

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Universiteit Leiden

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Ethnolinguistic Vitality and Diversity in the World

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Mevrouw/Mijnheer de rector magnificus, zeer gewaardeerde leden van de besturen van Comité International Permanent des Linguistes (CIPL), Comité Internationale de Philosophie et Sciences Humaines (CIPSH), Stichting Bedreigde Talen, zeer gewaardeerde leden van het curatorium van deze bijzondere leerstoel *Ethnolinguistic vitality and diversity in the world*, geacht faculteitsbestuur, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders, and as we say in West Africa for inclusiveness: all protocols observed.

Inleiding

Three and a half decades ago, in what was then East Berlin, CIPL held its 14th Congress. As a young PhD scholar at the Australian National University in Canberra, I was privileged to participate in the Congress and I had the historical, unforgettable experience of crossing the famous Berlin Wall twice a day, for five days, from West to East and back. At that Congress, the General Assembly of CIPL adopted a resolution inspired by a talk by Johannes Bechert (see Bechert 1990) in which he asked: if languages and worldviews enshrined in them are vanishing "why is it that linguists in general are not concerned about the imminent loss of a major part of their empirical basis" (Himmelmann 2008: 339). That resolution brought in its trail some consciousness raising among linguists. Coming as I was from Australia, one of the hotbeds of language endangerment and loss, I could relate to this. I saw and heard about the different stages of endangerment of Australian languages from established linguists including Bob Dixon (1983), Ken Hale (1992) and my fellow PhD scholars describing and documenting Australian languages (e.g. Nick Evans (see his 2022 book), Alan Dench, David Wilkins, Nick Reid, Ian Green, and Melanie Wilkinson). I had just completed a semester at the School of Australian Linguistics[1] in Batchelor working with two speakers of Kukatja (kux) to describe their language and training them in community language work. Kukatja is one of the strong languages of Central Australia which is still spoken across generations and is being taught to children today. I experienced firsthand the marginalization and the marginalizing conditions under which indigenous Australians were using their languages and how some children were shifting from the local languages that were still in use, to Aboriginal English or Kriol.

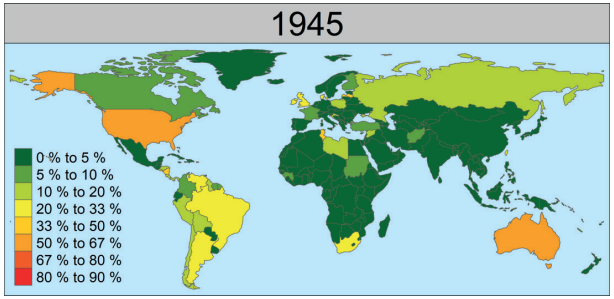
The Australian situation illustrated for me some of the reasons for language endangerment: some of the languages were lost due to conquest, colonization, and genocide; forced migration and displacement of people such as the children of the Stolen Generation, as they came to be known. Others fell out of use because of shift to other languages, mainly the language of the colonizer or a variety thereof. In these situations, there is reduced or loss of intergenerational transmission to children. When the older speakers pass away, the languages fade away and fall into sleep and disuse. It is reported that at the time of colonization in the late 18th century there were some 250 living distinct languages with their dialects in use in Australia. "Of the 250 or more distinct languages spoken in 1788, only 15–18 are now being learned by children as their first language. Another 100 or so have only small numbers of elderly speakers remaining, and most have no full or fluent speakers left at all." (Koch and Nordlinger 2014: 4). I use the Australian situation to draw attention to some factors that play a role in the loss, death, and endangerment of languages.[2] The Australian situation is also representative of situations of First Nations around the world, especially in North America.

The process of language loss need not be as dramatic as these situations. It is not just languages that may be lost. Registers, codes and varieties of languages are also being lost leading to diminishing knowledge. I am a speaker of Anfoegbe, a variety of Ewedomegbe or Inland Ewe, a dialect of Ewegbe spoken in the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa. When we were growing up, we were told of a code that was part of Anfoegbe. It was used in situations when the Anfoe did not want outsiders, who may be speakers of other Ewe varieties, to understand them.

The name of the code is **Tegbɔgbrɔ**. One can infer from the name that it was created through manipulation of the word **gbegbɔgblɔ** 'spoken language'. By the time I was growing up only some elders remembered some of the expressions. When these passed away that knowledge went with them. I hadn't heard about linguistics then to apply it to documenting the code!

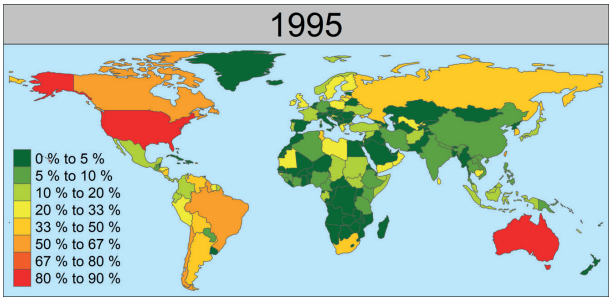
By the end of World War II when nationalism, modernization, and urbanization set in more languages became endangered as people moved away from their ancestral homes and shifted to languages of modernity such as those introduced by formal education or shifted to languages of urban centers in order to participate in the economy. The Language Conservancy[3] represents the state of language loss in 1945 as in Map 1:

Map 1: Language loss at the end of World War II 1945



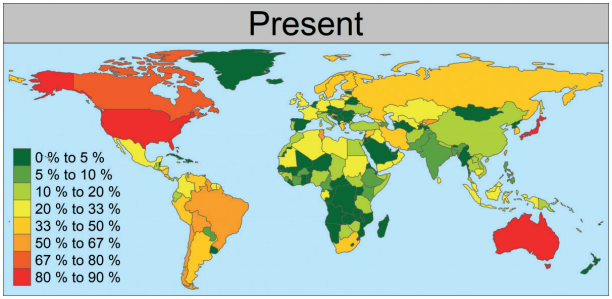
Because of the effects of modernization, nationalism and globalization and colonization, the loss of languages continued. 50 years later more languages were lost. Compare the representation of the situation in 1995 as depicted in Map 2:

Map 2 Language loss situation 1995



Pay attention to the changes in the colours in North America for example. A few years ago Simons et al (2019) represented the state of language loss globally as shown in Map 3, (also from Language Conservancy).

Map 3 Curent language loss situation (Simons et al. 2019)



The continued loss of languages has been noted as a crisis that needs to be addressed (Kraus s1992). There is an increasing awareness about the language-loss crisis around the world. However, the forces that promote the fading away of languages are also increasing in their assault. Globalization and modernization as well as changes in the ecosystems around the world are advancing.

It is not only whole languages as such that we are losing, aspects of vibrant languages are also disappearing because

of changes in the environment or culture. Changes in the ecosystem and the environment engender reduced transmission of cultural practices and their associated linguistic expression leading to the loss of the expressive power of the languages. Herman Batibo (2013: 164) observes that the Sukuma of Tanzania, like many African lingua-cultures, were rich in traditional processes pertaining to hunting and agricultural practices, such as how to cut meat or plants, how to conserve flesh items, how to prepare food and so on. All these were elaborated in the vocabulary of the languages. Thus, in Shisukuma, for example, the notion of "cut" was expressed in more than ten vocabulary items:

Example 1: The notion of "cut" in Shisukuma
ku-búta "to cut in two pieces", which functions as the general cut verb
ku-gáta "to cut in several pieces"
ku-chemba "to cut progressively into pieces"
ku-baaga "to cut to remove skin"
ku-téma "to cut by chopping"
ku-sínza "to cut neck of animal"
ku-sanzagá "to chop an animal to pieces"
ku-tína "to cut e.g. rope"
ku-puuga "to slash, e.g. grass"
ku-séenha "to cut firewood"
ku-kéng'enha "to chop with force"

Batibo further notes that most young Sukuma today have acquired only one or two terms for 'cut', typically the general cut verb. The reduced knowledge about these terms goes hand in hand with the reduction of diversity in the ecosystem as well as in knowledge about the associated skills and practices. Such reduction of the expressive power of languages and reduction in transmission of language and cultural knowledge is ongoing all over the world.[4]

Language endangerment has been represented rhetorically as a "third extinction crisis" (Maffi 1999:21), after biodiversity and the erosion of traditional cultures (cf. Errington 2003: 724). Just as other crises like the climate change need all hands-on-deck, we need all stakeholders not just the experts but also the citizenry to play their part in turning the tide from language endangerment to vitality. In the rest of this lecture, I want to explore some of the ways in which language experts, on the one hand, and language users, on the other, can contribute to turning the tide. I want to first reflect briefly on the role of languages in the lives of their users and how language experts can contribute to their vitality. I will then look at the role of language users and community members in turning the tide and promoting ethnolinguistic vitality through the lens of the sustainability of Dutch.

Languages and social lives

Even though some experts and some community members acknowledge the language endangerment crisis, it is not universally thought of as one of the wicked problems of our time. If you were to ask an ordinary citizen to mention the issues that they care about most with respect to their lives, they will list many things including climate change, war, inequality, corruption, discrimination, and the access people have to economic and educational opportunities.[5] Languages or language does not feature at all. This is shocking because languages are so special to humans and impact our lives at the individual level in everyday interactions, and at the societal level in all aspects of human development: economics, governance, education, health etc. With respect to how special the human communication system is Michael Tomasello (2008: 299) asserts that it is only humans who do not use their "evolved communicative displays and possibly signals with all other individuals of their species (even birds with different dialects still recognize and respond appropriately to songs in other dialects)". Moreover, Steve Levinson (2012: 397) points out that diversity and variation are the hallmark of human languages "there is no other animal on the planet, as far as we know, which has such myriad variants of form and meaning at

every level in its communication system." If human languages are so special why are they not called up as one of the wicked problems of our time. I suggest that it is because linguists have taken languages and linguistics out of the social lives of people. It will be good if in the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) linguists and language experts will strive to put languages and linguistics back into the lives of language users.

Linguists should take advantage of the current climate of reassessing the modes of knowledge production, creation and transmission and examine the nature of their named discipline Linguistics. It has to be recognized that it has developed a history, traditions, ideologies, methodologies and theories rooted in colonization and missionization (Leonard e.g. 2018, Deurmet et al. 2021) and developed certain biases and practices, attitudes and relations towards the users of languages.

(i) Linguists should put back humans and language users into their study of languages

A simple outcome of this self-reflection should be a reconsideration of the definition of the discipline. Part of the legacy we have inherited defines linguistics as "the scientific study of language". What is the understanding of "scientific" here? Whose science? If languages are special for humans and are the primary means by which humans articulate the products of their mind, including the arts, then a discipline concerned with its study should explicitly include a humanistic perspective. The first step linguists should take is to broaden the hackneyed definition of the discipline as "the scientific study of language" to "the humanistic and scientific study of languages". I have found only one Department of Linguistics that defines linguistics in this way on its website. I am proud to say this is the University of Texas at Austin, one of the supporting institutions of this *bijzondere leerstoel* (cf. Epps et al. 2017 on the Humanities of Speaking).

(ii) Linguistic models should account for actual language use

Dingemanse & Liesenfeld (2022: 5664) recently challenged computational linguists to not rush to base their models only on data from well-known and well-researched languages. They identified what is needed of linguistic models which applies to the whole field of linguistics. They wrote: "We need language models that are representative of the actual ways in which people use language, and conversational interfaces that give people the feeling they do not have to leave their own linguistic identities at the door." If our models do not alienate the language users then they can relate to the studies of their languages, and languages and linguistics will become part and parcel of their lives.

(iii) Linguists need to explain better the role and relevance of languages and linguistics in everyday life

Linguists need to articulate the social implications of languages for people, life, and nature. They need to be able to advance the argument that understanding language(s) and language use can help us address the day-to-day "wicked problems" of our time**.** They need to be concerned about the role of languages in the economic wellbeing of their users. They also need to engage with social inequalities created by languages and language use. Above all they need to be able to make their findings relevant to decision makers in politics. If we are able to do so, then language users can experience language and linguistics as part of their lives. "Language is not everything, but without language everything is nothing' (Wolff 2016: 44, Hill and Ameka 2022). I turn now to the second part of my lecture to discuss issues in the vitality of Dutch and the role different stakeholders can play in maintaining and supporting it.

Is Dutch an endangered language?

When we talk and think about endangered languages, we tend to think about small minority languages of indigenous peoples. We tend to assume that big languages such as Dutch are safe[6]. Dutch is a big international language used by 24 million Dutch first language speakers, (about 17 million in the Netherlands, 6,5 million in Belgium and some 400,000 in Surinam). Add to these, some 8 million second language speakers. It is one of the 40 most-spoken languages in the world as well as the twelfth language on the internet?[7]

Johan Van Hoorde who until 1st January 2022 was senior beleidsadviseur van de Taalunie[8], an organization set up by the Dutch and Belgian and Surinamese governments to promote Dutch, had this to say in an article in 1998, at the height of the discourse about language death and extinction. He asserted that Dutch will only die over the dead body of the TaalUnie.[9] But he acknowledges that Dutch is threatened, even if not with extinction. He wrote:

> Dutch may not be threatened with extinction in the short or medium term, but it is in danger of losing domains. It could eventually become just a colloquial language, a language you use at home to speak with your family – the language you can best express your emotions in – but not the one you use for the serious things in life: work, money, science, technology.

David Crystal in his 2000 *Language Death* book (pp 28-29) cites this to show that even big languages like Dutch are threatened. Van Hoorde draws attention to a perception that many Dutch users have, especially in the current climate when Dutch is losing ground as a language of medium of instruction in higher education, and the debate over whether English language should be introduced from the very lowest grades of Primary Schools. Dutch is thus losing ground in the domain of education. I want to, however, reflect on another domain where Dutch is losing ground and where I want to suggest that language users from all walks of life can contribute to promote the vitality of Dutch. That domain is the arena of language use involving first language speakers of Dutch and *mensen met een immigratieachtergrond* 'people with immigration background, like myself. One of the ways in which endangered languages are striving to maintain their vitality is through the creation of new speakers and encouraging more people to learn and use the languages. For migrants into the Netherlands there are formal systems for learning the language: the *inburgering* courses, the NT2 learning opportunities created for different ages of newcomers are all commendable. What migrants complain about is the lack of opportunities to practice (in informal contexts) their Dutch that they so much desire to acquire. The main obstacle is that once an interlocutor appears to be someone with an immigration background, the first language Dutch speaker immediately chooses English Lingua Franca or asks that the conversation be carried out in English. Language choice for interaction in this type of context is determined by several factors:

The first is appearance. Once the person appears to be a migrant it is assumed that one should not use Dutch. It is reported that because of the cosmopolitan nature of the Netherlands where there are lots of business people who come from outside, once people see others smartly dressed in a suit, for instance, even if they are Dutch, people accost them with English.

Many Dutch first language speakers would argue that they switch from Dutch in these contexts because they want to be inclusive in their communication. They claim that they want everybody to use a language that they all understand for mutual communication. This is very considerate of the other and one could say it is very polite behavior. Unfortunately, it is not

perceived as such by the intended targets of the behavior. Many perceive the shift to Global English or European English or the use of English Lingua Franca as a strategy to exclude them from participating in Dutch communities of practice which is contrary to the intent of the formal language learning programs.

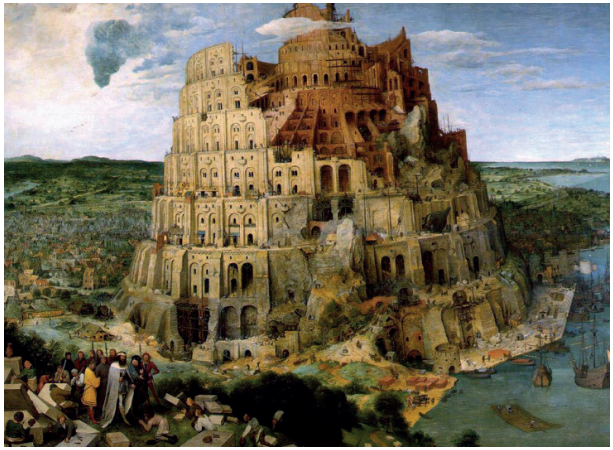
There appears to be some unconscious language ideologies that drive the shift from Dutch to English especially when first language Dutch speakers encounter people who do not seem to speak Dutch natively. It appears that for many first language Dutch speakers it seems rude to use Dutch in such interactions. There is as mentioned earlier an idea of using one common language to communicate. This ties in with a set of ideas relating to a standard way of speaking Dutch such that anything that deviates from it, even if it is some variety of Dutch leads to misunderstanding: *Ik versta je niet*. These ideas are coupled with prescriptive and purist ideologies where there is no tolerance of allowing other languages to flow into the Dutch of multilinguals.

Tower of Babel vs the Pentecost

How can one encourage the use of Dutch in this domain of communication between first language speakers and *mensen met immigratie achtergrond?* I recommend that multilingual modes of communication be adopted, especially receptive multilingualism and code-switching and code-mixing strategies. The emergence of the plurality of languages and the lack of mutual intelligibility in the world has been explained by the story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible (Genesis 11. 1-9 The New Jerusalem Bible)

[1] The whole world spoke the same language, with the same vocabulary.
[2] Now, as people moved eastwards they found a valley in the land of Shinar where they settled.
[3] They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and bake them in the fire.' For stone they used bricks, and for mortar they used bitumen.
[4] 'Come,' they said, 'let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top reaching heaven. Let us make a name for ourselves, so that we do not get scattered all over the world.'
[5] Now Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower that the people had built.
[6] 'So they are all a single people with a single language!' said Yahweh. 'This is only the start of their undertakings! Now nothing they plan to do will be beyond them.
[7] Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they cannot understand one another.'
[8] Yahweh scattered them thence all over the world, and they stopped building the city.
[9] That is why it was called Babel, since there Yahweh confused the language of the whole world, and from there Yahweh scattered them all over the world.

Fig 1: The Tower of Babel



An aspect of the story which is less celebrated is that it illustrates that language is a tool for collaboration and helps us in solving our coordination problems, implying that the Tower of Babel could be built because they spoke one language.

Speaking different languages is a confused state where humans could no longer cooperate as they did not understand each other. But this is an Old Testament idea. There is another story in the New Testament which talks of mutual understanding between people even when they speak different languages.

Acts 2: 5-11 Day of Pentecost (The New Jerusalem Bible)
5 Now there were devout men living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven,
6 and at this sound they all assembled, and each one was bewildered to hear these men speaking his own language.
7 They were amazed and astonished. ‹Surely,› they said, ‹all these men speaking are Galileans?
8 How does it happen that each of us hears them in his own native language?
9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; people from Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,
10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya round Cyrene; residents of Rome-
11Jews and proselytes alike -Cretans and Arabs, we hear them preaching in our own language about the marvels of God.'

What happened at Pentecost could be described as a case of receptive multilingualism . As the depiction in Fig 2 shows individual multilinguals are engaged in communication in their own languages and their interlocutors understand them. This is receptive multilingualism.[10]

Fig 2: Pentecost Day Receptive Multilingual Communication.

'Receptive multilingualism' has been used to characterize a communicative practice 'in which interlocutors use their own language while speaking to each other' (Bahtina & ten Thije 2012: 4899). The passage from the Acts shows that the disciples were amazed that they could understand the men who were speaking in their own languages.

There are different constellations of the languages involved in such communication. They could be closely related as is the case among, for example, Scandinavian languages or Germanic languages or Baltic or Romance languages. Two colleagues who are office mates regularly and seamlessly interact in this mode where one speaks Brazilian Portuguese and the other Galician (selected among the other languages that they have in their repertoires). This form of communication could also involve typologically distant or less related languages. One can observe such multilingual communication in many communities in regions of high linguistic diversity. Receptive multilingualism was observed in Europe in the Late Middle Ages and in Early Modern Times when communication was multilingual by default. In former times receptive multilingualism was not so unusual, especially not in co-present trading communication, e.g. on fairs in more distant parts of Europe (Braunmüller 2007: 27). This mode of communication fell out of use in everyday life due to political developments such as the rise of nationalism in early 19th Century in Europe. With it the rise of monolingualism and its associated linguistic standardization for national unity leading to suppression of local varieties.

Receptive multilingualism is promoted as a policy within the EU from the mid-1990s (Zeevaert & ten Thije 2007). It is informally used in migrant families where typically the older generation would speak the ancestral language (e.g., Turkish, Moroccan Arabic, Amazigh) whereas the younger ones would use the language of wider communication (e.g. Dutch, German, French) in which they are more competent (see Hekenrath 2011). I have observed this mode of communication used on Belgian TV between Dutch and French speakers. If this mode of receptive multilingualism

is adopted in communication between first language Dutch speakers and *mensen met immigratie achtergrond* it will enhance mutual understanding and provide opportunities for language learning in terms of receptive competence, as well as providing models of language use. This would increase the number of users of Dutch thereby increasing its vitality.

Receptive multilingualism has been shown to be the mode of language use in various endangered language communities which has promoted the maintenance of linguistic diversity. For instance, Singer (2018) argues that in Warrwui in northern Australia with a population of 400 people, but with 9 languages used in the community, receptive multilingualism is the norm used by the community members in daily interactions, and has contributed to the maintenance of the diversity and vitality of the languages where none is suppressed. It seems to me that to strengthen the use of Dutch in interactions between first language Dutch speakers and *mensen met immigratie achergrond*, multilingual communicative practices of receptive multilingualism and code-switching and mixing will contribute to Dutch not losing ground in this arena of use.

One of the features of receptive multilingual communication is that the interactants have to be attentive hearers. They need to tune their minds to understand each other. This is very important in oral communication with respect to accents. This is relevant whether the communication is in the same language e.g. English or Dutch where different varieties are involved. Let me mention two contexts briefly. One of the ways in which the pandemic has revolutionized communication across distances is the use of online platforms like Zoom or MSTeams or Skype. In a recent BBC report entitled "Not everyone who speaks English is treated the same way. What happens when accent discrimination creeps in to our conscious and unconscious – and what do we do about our biases?",[11] the author reports how during a Zoom meeting some colleagues complained that they could not understand what an Ethiopian colleague was saying and asked that he should write his comment in the chat. Incidentally the colleagues are also not native speakers of English. This is one way in which language can be a tool of discrimination.

Similarly, I am always amazed, if not shocked, when watching Dutch television and once someone comes on who is perceived to not speak ABN Standard Dutch, subtitles are provided. The most shocking aspect is when the person comes from Surinam, a country that is a member of the TaalUnie. If varieties are treated this way, we know from experience that people eventually stop using them and thereby contributing to language loss. A way out is for all to make a little extra effort to tune their senses to varieties of languages and accents for mutual understanding.

Conclusion

I have in the foregoing proposed that language endangerment as a "third crisis of extinction" after biodiversity and loss of traditional knowledge systems should be addressed by all stakeholders, just as we all contribute to addressing the climate crisis. I have highlighted the role of linguists and language experts especially in putting back languages and linguistics into the social lives of people. They can do so in three ways: expanding the definition of their field to include humanistic studies of languages, after all as one scholar said, languages are to the humanities as mathematics is to the natural sciences. Second, developing linguistic models that account for actual language use of language users, and third, explaining the role and relevance of languages in addressing everyday wicked problems of human development.

Through the lens of Dutch language use in the domain of interactions with *mensen met immigratie achergrond*, I have suggested that one way of maintaining ethnolinguistic vitality is through multilingual practices of receptive multilingualism and code switching. There are many more things that we need to do: we need to question our ideologies and shift or change

mindsets with respect to our practices. We need to shift from monolithic constructs to pluralistic systems, e.g. pluralistic knowledge systems, from mono-lingual ideologies to multilingualism; from standard language practices to everyday "vernacular" practices and destandardization. Finally, we all need to make an extra effort to tune our minds to variation and to tolerate what we may consider as a deviation from the standard for increased mutual understanding and eventual maintenance of the vitality of linguistic diversity and variation.

Outro[12]

I have outlined what is part of the outreach programme of the *bijzondere leerstoel*. Other activities include advancing research and practice of language documentation. To this end, I will be engaged in the documentation of endangered languages. I will also be working together with my colleagues Enoch Aboh, MariCarmen Parafita Couto and Anne L. Beatty-Martínez (McGill University) to investigate code-switching/code-mixing in multilingual communities in Benin (West Africa) and Belize (Central America), where multilingual discourse involving code-switching/code-mixing is the norm. These projects will contribute to our understanding of multilingualism and ethnolinguistic vitality and diversity. In the process we will be training new language documenters and continue organising training programmes in endangered language areas around the world. Finally, based on these investigations and activities, we will be offering policy advisories on strategies to turn the tide from language endangerment to ethnolinguistic vitality.

Dankwoord

Before I end, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to several bodies and people.
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I want to acknowledge the teachers and mentors whose guidance and teaching has brought me this far. My linguistics egg was laid at the University of Ghana in Accra and hatched at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia. I am grateful to Lawrence Adai Boadi (who was laid to rest earlier this month) and to "the 3Ds": my academic Mum Florence Abena Dolphyne, we pray that you continue to be with us in good health. Your journey from Achinakrom to the first female Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana continues to inspire. I remember the late Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu, and the late Alan Stewart Duthie. Your support and desire for me to pursue graduate studies in Linguistics laid the foundation for what is happening today. To Bob Dixon, the founding Professor and head of linguistics at the ANU, who despite the challenges was determined to make sure that I enrolled in their program and was prepared to renew my scholarship offer from semester to semester from 1982 until I finally could find travel support in 1984. That singular decision and action is what hatched the egg. Deep respect and thanks to my other teachers at the ANU especially the late Tim Shopen, Anna Wierzbicka, Bill Foley, Avery Andrews, Phil Rose, and Harold Koch. Whatever I know about languages, the questions that boggle my mind, were fomented during discussions with my teachers and especially with my colleagues and graduate students over several cups of "Felix Specials" in the Café in the Student Union building in those days. I am grateful for the continued debates with Alan Dench, Nick Evans, David Wilkins, Cliff Goddard, Hillary Chapel, Mick Piper, Ian Creen, and my special friend, colleague and collaborator Deborah Hill, who is here present and who has travelled the farthest, all the way from Canberra with her partner Damian Molony, to participate in the inauguration of this special chair. I simply say thank you for everything.

Thanks to several colleagues and collaborators who invited me to various institutions across the globe. These visits broadened my horizons and enriched my intellectual and cultural capital. I am humbled by the respect and affection accorded me on these visits. I have learnt a lot from long years of collaboration with Lars Hellan on the Legon-Trondeim project and more.

Over the years I have also learnt a great deal from my promovendi and mentees amidst our debates and also in relaxing times, some of whom are in the side pews donned in Professorial gowns. Thanks to James Essegbey for enduring three and a half decades of our mutual heated discussions. Enoch Aboh, our fights continue but I look forward to our collaboration on the new NWO funded project to understand the human ability to seamlessly mix, switch, and move between named languages in their repertoire together with our cherished colleagues Maria del Carmen Parafita Couto and Anne L. Beatty-Mart*ínez*. To James Essegbey, the late Kofi Dorvlo and Mercy Bobuafor - together we spearheaded the documentation of Southern Ghana-Togo Mountain Languages. As we spread the wings to document the other languages such as Animere, I count on your continued support in advancing the theory and practice of documentary linguistics in the West African context .

My growth benefited from inspiration and sustenance from the vigorous intellectual life, not to mention the "iconoclastic" mindset, of the Language and Cognition Group at the Max Planck Institute of Psycholinguistics directed by Steve Levinson who cannot be here today, but Penny Brown is here.

Thank you Penny and Steve . I crossed paths with many of my promovendi and mentees and other colleagues there. Many are now Professors, some of whom are here today. Eva Schultze Berndt, Birgit Helling, Juergen Bohnemeyer, Frederieke Lüpke, Anna Margretts, Mandana Seyfeddinipur, Roberto Diabolo Zavala (aka Ku) and those nurtured from Leiden: Mark Dingemanse, Saskia van Putter and Rebecca Defina.
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I doff my hat to the many language documenters together with whom we co-create and produce knowledge about the theory, methodologies, and technologies of language documentation during the Summer Schools that we have organized since 2008 in different locations. I thank the participants both facilitators and trainees among them Ayu'nwi Neba Fusi, Emmanuel Ngue Um, Nadine Grimm, Serge Sagna, Samuel Atintono, Ebitare Obikudo, Kenneth Bodua-Mango, Solange Mekamgoum …

Thanks to my families. Thanks to my parents for exposing me to language variation from my early years. To my father, John Ameka who would have been 99 in December and who longed to see a day like this. Unfortunately, the day has come seven years too late. When my brother Gabriel became Professor of Organismic Biology at the University of Ghana, my father was delighted and proud, and he asked Gabriel: what about your brother Felix - when?
To my mother Isabella Adzoa Krobea Gawu Ameka. My grandfather, James Gawu, a man of his time who supported his male children in formal education with one becoming a Headmaster/Director of Education and the other a Professor of Geology, yet deprived his girls of formal education. My mother, however, through informal education learned to read and write Ewe and makes use of English symbolically. She was there for us all the time. Davi! Akpe! **Vi náɖu ɖí *ƒ*o háfí dadáá náɖu na nètsí dɔ dɔ gbeáwótsógbe. Akpé émetsonú ɖéwóé ke.** 'Child should eat and be satisfied before the mother eats made it that you went hungry on days. Thank you! Here are some of its outcomes.' Thanks to my brothers and sisters alive and those gone before us.

My gratitude to Cecilia, my wife, who because of complications of visa procedures could not be present here, but is following the livestream with the children. To my children and god children: Aseye, the twins Dzidzo and Dzidizeme, Albert, Sika, Enam, Ewoenam and many more. I appreaciate you. Your multilingual and creative practices continue to provide fodder for my brain. At age 2, you can begin a sentence with some Ewe words, add an Akan verb and finish with a mixed phrase in English and for some of you even a little Dutch, in a systematic way. How can we explain this capacity? I look forward to attending to more of such utterances as you all grow into more complex multilinguals.

Thanks to the Okyerefo family of Likpe Agbozume who took me into their home and socialized me into Sekpele ways of speaking. Thank you Rev. Professor Michael Okyerefo, and thank you Rev Dr Simon Kofi Appiah for coming all the way from Ghana to witness the event.

To my Leiden “family”: Caroline, Anneke, Jubayru and Asta. Thank you for your care and support over these decades. To Maggy Konter-Katani, thank you for being the elder African sister, and to Azeb Amha for being the younger African sister.

I appreciate and thank all family, friends, colleagues and well-wishers who have graced the occasion with your presence online or in person. I hope that you have been persuaded to take little steps in your own small ways to help promote ethnolinguistic vitality and diversity in the world!
Ayikooo!

Nye gbe dze anyi!

Ik heb gezegd!

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Notes

1 The School of Australian Linguistics (SAL) was founded by Ken Hale to train indigenous Australian language speakers in principles of linguistics to equip them to be able to go back to the communities to promote the learning and teaching of the languages. Ken Hale (1972: 386) believed that advances cannot be made "if important sectors of linguistics continue to be dominated by scholars who are not native speakers of the languages they study". He wanted the institution to provide training for the indigenous native speakers of the Australian languages. At the time I was there, SAL was part of the Darwin Institute of Technology which became Charles Darwin University, Darwin. It was separate from Batchelor College which was training indigenous students for other professions like community health workers. Today SAL is a unit in Batchelor College, a College within Charles Darwin University

2 See Thomason (2015) Chapter 2 for a lucid textbook exposé on "why and how languages become extinct". See also Hinton et al (2018) and Rehg and Campbell (2018) for discussions on language endangerment and language revitalization.

3 https://languageconservancy.org/language-loss/

4 An on-going loss of expressive power of my language Anfoegbe that we are witnessing concerns changes in agricultural activities. One of the crops grown in the area is yams. When we were growing up when yams are harvested (December/January) they are stored in particular ways. A specific way of storing yam heads which will be the seedlings to be planted at the beginning of the next yam planting season (March). The yam heads are stored in a yam barn, called **texɔ** 'yam building' by tying one head at a time to the poles that are used to construct the building and in a vertical dimension. One yam head above the other to allow for aeration and sprouting. The verb used for this is **ỹɛ́ɛ̃** which is also used for talking about fastening thatch onto a roof. These two practices have faded away and the younger generation do not know or use this verb.

5 In its Global Shapers Survey (World Economic Forum 2017) , over 30,000 young people were asked about the issues that they cared about most. The responses were: climate change, war, inequality, corruption, discrimination, and the access people have to economic and educational opportunities (cf. Jones and Themistocoleus 2022:2)

6 In fact in the African context we say that the big languages are the threat to the small languages.

7 https://www.nt2.nl/en/dossier/nederlands_leren/6_redenen_om_nederlands_te_leren (see also Steurs n.d Is Nederlands een groot taal?)

8 een Vlaams-Surinaams-Nederlandse taalbeleidsorganisatie,

9 In an interview in *Onze Taal*, https://taalunie.org/actueel/267/uiteindelijk-was-ik-mister-spelling Johan van Hoorde says of himself that in the end he was Mr. Spelling.

10 I am very grateful to Anneke Breedveld for the artwork.

11 https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210528-the-pervasive-problem-of-linguistic-racism

12 An *outro* is a short, distinct closing section at the end of something (such as a piece of music, a performance, or a news report) (Merriam Webster)

Prof.dr. Felix K. Ameka

Felix K. Ameka was born in Anfoega Wademaxe in the North Danyi District of the Volta Region of Ghana, a few days before Ghana became independent. He obtained his BA Honours (1st Class) degree in Linguistics from the University of Ghana (1980). After working as a Teaching Assistant in Linguistics at the same University for some years he won an Australian National University (ANU) Master Degree Scholarship to pursue graduate studies in Canberra. Upon obtaining his MA Linguistics degree in 1986, he was awarded a PhD Scholarship at the same University. The PhD degree was conferred on him in 1991 for his thesis entitled: *Ewe: its grammatical constructions and illocutionary devices*; it was the runner up for the University (wide) medal for the best PhD thesis in 1991 at the ANU. He has been a Scientific Staff member at Leiden University since January 1, 1991. He was also a Research Associate in the Language and Cognition Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen for a quarter of a century, until December 2017. Felix Ameka is a socio-cultural-cognitive and a fieldworking linguist. His primary research interests are the quest for the meaning of linguistic signs and exploring their use in social interaction. He is interested also in the reflexive relation between language, culture and cognition, exploring ways in which social and cultural processes shape and are impacted by structural dimensions of language and by multilingualism. He works with primary data collected using ethnographic and experimental methods especially on West African languages. Among others he is interested in descriptive and documentary linguistics, anthropological linguistics, and contact linguistics. More recently he has become interested in digital humanities, and specifically in language technologies for lesser-resourced languages. He has been an invited Visiting Fellow to several universities in Europe (e.g. Italy, Norway, Germany, Denmark) the USA (e.g. University of Florida, Gainesville), Africa (Ethiopia, Nigeria and Ghana), Australia (e.g. University of Melbourne, La Trobe University, James Cook University, and the Australian National University) as well as Brazil (Sao Paolo). He has been Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* since 1995 and serves on Editorial Boards of other journals such as *The Journal of West African Languages*, and *The Journal of Pragmatics*. He has served on Executive Committees of various professional societies and is currently President of the World Congress of African Linguistics. He served for a decade on the International Expert Panel for the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) and serves as an expert for UNESCO on among others The World Atlas of Languages (WAL) project. Felix Ameka is an elected Fellow of three learned societies: The Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences (FGA), the Australian Academy of the Humanities (FAHA) and Academia Europaea (MAE).

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