Things people speak?: a response to Orman's 'Linguistic diversity and language loss: a view from integrational linguistics' with rejoinder

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ABSTRACT

This article is presented in two parts. The first is a response to Orman's integrationist critique of orthodox theorising of linguistic diversity and language loss. It asks how integrationist claims might be empiricised and translated into a practical research programme. A discussion of the ontology of Norf'k and the pitfalls of employing metalinguistic terminology is followed by the second part: an argument claiming an integrationist investigation of language loss/death is possible if conceived as a lay-oriented enquiry.

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I read with interest Orman's article on linguistic diversity, language loss/death, and integrational linguistics in a recent number of *Language Sciences* (2013, 40). He offers a clear explication of what Harrisian integrationism is in terms of modern linguistic theory and how it deals with its own critique of mainstream linguistics and indeed modern approaches to language documentation and 'saving languages'. However, Orman offers few clues as to what integrationism can do for *things people speak*[2] and any other reified or non-reified ideation of language, or whatever linguists or others choose to label as their "first-order" research object.

While I agree with much of his critique of the mainstream linguistic diversity and language loss/death literature, by focusing on the *not* in his argument (what integrational linguistics is *not*), I believe Orman has avoided the *is* of his defence. By taking a strongly theoretical and philosophical approach to a historical fiercely practical discipline like linguistic diversity

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    [2] By using this rather inelegant expression, I am avoiding a connection to any Hymsean use of 'ways of speaking' (e.g. Hymes, 1974).

studies and language documentation, it appears he may have thrown out the baby (saving languages and understanding ways of speaking and first-order phenomena) with the bathwater (integrationism's rejecting of the possibility of 'language' and 'a language'; the claim that metalinguistics cannot be culture neutral).

Orman can of course be excused for this – it was not a part of his brief. What remains, and what I was left wondering was: What would a practical and empirical integrationist perspective look like when considering the ontological basis of language and its relationship to aspects of modern language documentation and revival, if indeed such a perspective is congruous or possible? As a linguist with some training in integrational approaches to language (though not necessarily Harrisian integrational linguistics) and ecolinguistics, the empiricisation and description of a few of Orman's integrationist claims would certainly help me, and I would hope other linguists and other scientists, in approaching their 'first-order' object of study. I also hope these descriptions could and would be able to exist aside from any metalinguistic terminology one attaches to these first-order phenomena. My piece will be exploratory and consider the 'things people speak' or 'what people speak' instead of using language or 'way of speaking' to make sense of Orman's argument and a possible empiricisation of integrationism vis-à-vis studies in linguistic diversity and language loss.

Norf'k is what the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers speak on Norfolk Island, South Pacific (see Mühlhäusler, 2011 for historical and linguistic details). What Norf'k is, whether it is an indigenous language, or indeed a language at all is far from clear. Whatever it may be, it has been recognised as an endangered language by UNESCO (2007). I have worked on Norfolk Island and Norf'k for more than 7 years. I have heard people speak Norf'k, a 'thing people speak' distinctly different from other 'things people speak' in Australia, New Zealand, and New Caledonia, the closest inhabited neighbours to Norfolk Island. Norf'k has had many names, many positive and negative interpretations, and which only seem to make sense when spoken in the ecology where it was introduced and continued to develop – Norfolk Island. I have recently published a documentary account of Norfolk Island placenames (Nash, 2013), wherein I describe how arriving at an understanding of the situatedness and ecological embeddedness of Norfolk toponyms is crucial to appreciating not necessarily what the Norf'k *is*, or how Norf'k can be characterised, but more so how important toponyms are to understanding the *nature* of what Norf'k is and how Norf'k *works* linguistically, socially, and ecologically.

While I do not label my approach to this understanding of toponymy and language documentation integrationist by any means, an ecolinguistic analysis of toponyms and other linguistic and non-linguistic artefacts (words, expressions, other verbal and non-verbal behaviours) considers the elements (and even non-elements) of the contextualisations of things people speak which integrational linguists like Harris and Orman espouse. My collection, analysis, and interpretation of Norfolk toponyms in terms of Norf'k and English on Norfolk Island have, in a similar way to Orman, led me to conclude:

> Does this then ultimately leave the integrationist with nothing consequential to say qua integrationist on the politics of such 'segregational' issues as language endangerment/loss? This might well be the case although it would perhaps be more in line with integrational thinking to leave the question open based on the recognition that each instance of language endangerment/loss will be embedded in a unique mesh of contextualising factors, thus rendering the advancement of any blanket formula to such issues an unwarrantedly essentialist and decontextualised approach.
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> (Orman, 2013: 9)

The Norf'k situation is a single case and possibly not applicable to other situations. My Norfolk research has led me to two scientific and personal realisations:

1. "What Norf'k is typologically does not affect how Norf'k is used in Norfolk toponymy" (Nash, 2013: 24).
2. There is a strong requirement to look at the role of singular cases in measuring and theorising about how people speak rather than striving to arrive at universalist or generalisable claims about the nature of language, ways of speaking, and human communication and/in context, whatever these concepts may mean or how they are managed.

Such an approach may be 'conclusion poor' but it may actually get us closer to understanding and approaching what our research object, way of speaking, or language we are observing (or participating in, or are a part of, or contextualising through our metalinguistic terminology) actually is.

Before inviting Orman to respond I would like to reflect on some of his claims to speculate about an answer myself. What are linguists (or anyone) to do to avoid a "non-committal cop-out" (Orman, 2013: 9), regardless of whether action is "entirely consistent with integrationism's wider scepticism in relation to the locus of expertise in linguistic matters and consequent reluctance to embrace any kind of prescriptive model"? Orman is clear about what integrationism's position is on the politics of language: "What it does not offer is a specific alternative model of language and society to the one based on the language myth". He also concedes "integrational theorists have generally not shown much interest in issues of ethnicity, identity and other abstract categories of social classification which have featured prominently in more mainstream language-political discussions both within and beyond academia".

It is essential for us to ask a few clear questions regarding linguistic diversity and language loss. First, do we speak (or communicate or make utterances or open our mouths)? If yes, do we also agree there are many varieties of how people speak (or whatever an integrationist would call them)? If yes, what are we to do with them, especially if people have political, social, and emotional motivation to continue speaking these things? Does it really matter whether we use the labels language, a language, ways of speaking, codes, or modes of communication when there is 'language work' to be done, however this is to be conceived or perceived philosophically? Despite the structuralist or any of the other –ist/–ism tendencies of most