



# Linguistic diversity and language loss: a view from integrational linguistics



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## ABSTRACT

This article offers an integrational linguistic critique of the way in which the notions of linguistic diversity and language loss/death are theorised within orthodox linguistics. The fundamental issue concerns the ontological status of languages. While orthodox approaches take the existence of separately identifiable languages or language varieties (lects) as a foundational theoretical postulate even in the absence of any consistent definitional criteria, from an integrational perspective languages are nothing more than second-order metalinguistic abstractions from actual language practices. Consequently, any theory of first-order linguistic diversity based on the enumeration of individual languages is automatically suspect. Furthermore, since languages do not exist as ontological realia, it cannot be the case that linguistic diversity is declining due to language loss. To suppose otherwise rests on a conflation of the linguistic and the metalinguistic, a failing endemic to orthodox linguistics. The discussion concludes by offering an integrational view on some of the epistemological and language-political issues which commonly surface in discussions of linguistic diversity and language loss.

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*It is the concept of linguistic unity which is theoretically problematic; not the concept of linguistic diversity.* – Roy Harris

*As soon as one stops searching for knowledge, or if one imagines that it need not be creatively sought in the depths of the human spirit but can be assembled extensively by collecting and classifying facts, everything is irrevocably and forever lost.* – Wilhlem von Humboldt

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I outline an integrational linguistic perspective (Harris, 1981, 1997, 1998) on several interrelated issues which have been the subject of extensive discussion and exposition in modern linguistics and the sociology/politics of language, namely those of linguistic diversity and language loss. Despite a fairly substantial literature which has appeared since Roy Harris' seminal publications in the early 1980s, amongst the range of theoretical positions which populate the field of contemporary linguistics integrationism continues to occupy a rather peripheral place within the discipline as a whole. The foremost reason for this, perhaps combined with the sometimes bellicose rhetoric of its proponents, is that integrationism rejects the theoretical basis upon which nigh on everything which passes for contemporary linguistics rests. The response to the criticisms offered by integrational theory from within mainstream academic linguistics has, with a few exceptions,

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unfortunately mostly been one of silence or incomprehension. It is therefore quite probable that the present contribution will suffer the same fate.

Given the relatively low profile of integrational linguistics, a brief overview of its theoretical foundations is in order. Central to the integrational critique of what it conceives variously as 'orthodox', 'mainstream' or 'segregational' linguistics<sup>1</sup> is the notion of the 'language myth' (Harris, 1981). The 'language myth' refers to two interrelated fallacies which, according to integrationists, have underwritten virtually all linguistic theorising in the modern Western tradition, namely the 'fixed-code fallacy' and the 'fallacy of telementation'. The former refers to the belief that languages exist as internally structured systems of invariant units and regularities and the consequent view that the description and analysis of these systems constitute the proper subject matter of a scientifically orientated linguistics. It is the existence of such fixed codes, knowledge of which is theoretically shared by all members of the (homogenous) speech communities in question, which enables the possibility of telementation. 'Telementation' is the term used by integrationists to refer to the notion that human linguistic communication occurs through the neat transference of thoughts and concepts from the mind of one individual to another. Fundamental to the integrationist rejection of the language myth is the rejection of the Saussurean notion of the linguistic sign as a biplanar entity which pairs a determinate form (*signifiant*) with a determinate meaning (*signifié*) and which has survived virtually unscathed in nearly all mainstream approaches in modern linguistics (structuralist, poststructuralist, generativist, etc.). Integrationism on the other hand adopts a *radically indeterminate* view of the linguistic sign. According to the integrationist view, signs are not decontextualised invariant items which pre-exist their manifestation in communicative episodes. To suppose otherwise is to artificially separate the material form of the sign from its semiological function which due to the open-ended nature of human communication can never be determined in advance of its deployment. Rather, signs are constantly made (and remade) by real contextualising individuals in the temporal flux of their communicative (integrating) activities. The only signs which occur in communicational episodes are those which the parties to such episodes construe as occurring, no more and no less. As Harris (1998: 21) notes, there is 'no higher court of appeal' in such matters. There is also no infallible guarantee that any two individuals involved a communicational episode will construe the 'same' signs as occurring since all signs are the products of individual contextualisation. Integrationism therefore takes a very different view of what constitutes communication. Given that the value attached to a sign is a context-dependent matter of individual contextualisation, there is no question of the intersubjective sharing of meaning which underwrites the telementational account of linguistic communication. Instead, integrationism views communication as involving the integration of human activities for which signs (linguistic or otherwise) act as interfaces. This entails a reversal of the ontological priority typically encountered in orthodox linguistics whereby communication is seen as presupposing language. Instead, from an integrationist standpoint, language presupposes communication.

The integrationist conception of the sign also entails a number of wider theoretical consequences. In particular, as Harris (1990: 45) notes, it allows one to do away with a number of commonplace assumptions, namely: '(i) that the linguistic sign is arbitrary; (ii) that the linguistic sign is linear; (iii) that words have meanings; (iv) that grammar has rules; and (v) that there are languages.'

Now, given that integrationism denies both the existence of languages as first-order linguistic realia as well as the possibility of providing objective criteria for the analysis of linguistic structure, the issues of linguistic diversity and language loss/death might not initially seem particularly promising candidates for an integrationist treatment, or at least one which is anything but relentlessly negative or critical in emphasis. However, while a critique of the orthodox account necessarily forms a central component, this paper attempts to challenge this view by showing that an alternative perspective on such phenomena is possible. The primary focus is on the ontological and epistemological issues thrown up by discourses on linguistic diversity and language loss/death from within mainstream linguistic approaches. The paper begins by outlining an integrationist view of linguistic diversity and language loss/death. My main contention in doing so, drawing on Harris' (1981) identification and deconstruction of the two-pronged 'language myth', is that there are no first-order linguistic phenomena which provide justification for the manner in which these phenomena are theorised and conceptualised in mainstream accounts. This alone is a controversial enough claim for the orthodox linguist to entertain. In fact, echoing the quotation from Roy Harris which stands as an epigraph to this paper,<sup>2</sup> I would even push the claim a little further and argue that while orthodox linguistics necessarily requires a theory of linguistic diversity – indeed Nichols (1989: 231) in her monumental study of worldwide typological diversity makes this very claim – as a corollary to its primary concern for the theorisation of components of linguistic unity, integrationism requires no such corresponding theory at the first-order level. After all, if, as integrationists maintain, the linguistic sign is not the instantiation of an abstract invariant but rather always the product of an act of context-bound creation, language is an important sense inherently and irredeemably diverse and any supplementary notions of linguistic diversity or difference can only be the product of metalinguistic reflexive practices, rather than objective-empirical accounts of actual states of affairs. Indeed, a central thrust of my argument is that orthodox accounts of linguistic diversity and language loss/death rest upon a confusion or a failure to draw the appropriate line between the *linguistic* and

<sup>1</sup> Integrationists use the designations 'orthodox', 'mainstream' or 'segregationist' to refer to any non-integrationist approaches in linguistics (structuralist, poststructuralist, generativist, etc.) which do not affirm or recognise the basic integrationist principle of the radical indeterminacy of the linguistic sign (Harris, 2007: 16). For integrationists, orthodox linguistics is 'segregationist' because it treats language and languages as autonomous objects of study, assumes that a neat dividing line can be drawn between the linguistic and non-linguistic and that language can be studied independently of the communicational context in which it occurs (Harris, 1998: 10). It is granted nevertheless that many linguists working within the aforementioned approaches would no doubt contest the attribution of such labels. I therefore employ the terms subject to this acknowledgement.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, however, as I shall argue in this paper, the concept of linguistic diversity *does* become problematic when founded upon theoretically dubious components of linguistic unity or invariance.

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