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Linguistic variation and time travel: Barrier, or border-crossing?



Jocelyn C. Ahlers*

Liberal Studies Department, San Marcos, CA, USA

A B S T R A C T

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Language endangerment disrupts indexical relationships between languages and communities prototypically defined by use of those languages, complicating notions of language community and speech community. Language variation, less visible in robust speech communities, is conspicuous in contracting speech communities. This variation is sometimes perceived as aiding border crossings to imagined past communities of practice; it is alternatively perceived as erecting barriers between present and past. Stances towards variation are worked out dialogically, and are key in defining speech communities and identities associated with those communities. In the case of Kawaiisu, spoken in the Tehachapi region of California, variations among speakers index broader community valorization of individuality, and its use by speakers and learners links to those values and practices. By contrast, in planning a teaching program for Pomo communities, the variations among seven distinct Pomoan languages spoken in Lake County, California were framed as a threat to community cohesion because they erected barriers to comprehension and accessibility. The suggestion that language planners subsume that variation into one overarching language with seven dialects was conceptualized as returning to a past when all Pomos could easily communicate with one another.

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1. Introduction

Language endangerment creates situations in which the indexical relationships between languages and communities prototypically defined by use of those languages are disrupted, complicating notions of language community, speech community, and, at a more basic level, language and speaker (see [Bailey, 2007](#) for a similar point regarding multilingual communities more generally). In many Native California communities, the use of or affiliation with endangered languages of heritage potentially creates community ties not only with present-day speakers and co-affiliates, but also with imagined ancestral communities wherein that language was a dominant means of communication. These “regimes of temporalization” ([Eisenlohr, 2004](#), p. 81) allow modern Native Californians to create links through time to past communities of practice associated with their languages of heritage, in the same way that the use of Hindi creates iconized links to an ancestral Indian past for diasporic Hindus in Mauritius. Language variation, less visible in a robust speech community, is conspicuous in such contracting speech communities, and the ideological attention paid to such variation is concomitantly heightened. As [Irvine and Gal \(2000\)](#) point out, “[t]he significance of linguistic differentiation is embedded in the politics of a region and its observers” (p. 35), so the purpose of this paper is to explore the significance of linguistic differentiation within two Native

* Tel.: +1 760 750 8014.

E-mail address: jahlers@csusm.edu.

California communities working to reclaim their endangered languages of heritage: the Pomo, and the Kawaiisu. In each case, I am particularly interested in examining the ways in which linguistic variation/differentiation can be read as creating or as interfering with speech community coherence. More broadly, this analysis suggests that examinations of speech communities associated with languages which are endangered can offer the opportunity to both question and refine our understanding of the notion of “speech community” itself.

Speech communities have been variously defined, and these definitions are typically made with reference to the idea of *language community*, a group of people who “manifest allegiance to a determinate denotational code” (Silverstein, 1998, p. 406), communicating with one another using a shared language, involving a “norm for using verbal forms that gradually conform to grammar” (Silverstein, 1998, p. 406). By contrast, the term *speech community* “indicates that there are perduring, presupposable regularities of discursive interaction in a group or population” (Silverstein, 1998, p. 407). Similarly, Gumperz defines a speech community as “any human aggregate characterized by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage” (1968, p. 381). These definitions and others (e.g., Bloomfield, 1935; Hymes, 1974) all appear to implicitly presuppose that these “regularities of discourse interaction” and “shared bodies of verbal signs” involve some shared denotational code(s), as well. It is here that the notion of an “endangered language speech community” opens the door to a reconsideration of this concept. Such a speech community is not defined by shared norms of interaction in the endangered language – in point of fact, in communities whose languages are critically endangered, such as those which are the focus of this paper, the majority of speech community members have very little linguistic competence in the language which we could think of as the referent of the speech community, in the sense of being the language to which all members orient as a key component in defining community membership: the endangered language.

In fact, this points to the problematic nature of labeling such a community. Phrases such as “endangered language community” suggest that all members of the community have access to the endangered language as a communicative code (they don’t), or can potentially be read as applying the modifier “endangered” to “community”, something which does not need to be reified, even though it is all too often felt by community members faced by a dominant homogenizing culture. The term “endangered” has also been critiqued by a number of authors due to its often-unexamined connotations, fuzzy definition, and presumed mandate (see, e.g., Dobrin et al., 2007; Errington, 2003; Hill, 2002); but it does, as I point out elsewhere (Ahlers, 2012) capture the felt sense of threat among community members. “Heritage language community” suggests that the referent language is a heritage language for all community members, but it is not: for most communities which see themselves as linked to an endangered language in some way, there is at least one fluent speaker for whom the language is not a “labeled language only reconstructively identifiable with ancestors of a population of users of some other language or languages” (Silverstein, 1998, p. 411). Furthermore, this use of “heritage language” runs counter to more widespread uses in the field of heritage language study (see, e.g., Polinsky and Kagan, 2007; Valdes, 2000), where heritage language speakers are speakers who grew up in homes where a non-dominant language was spoken, and who have some knowledge of that language; hearing Native California languages spoken in childhood in the home is rare within Native California communities, meaning that most language learners are not heritage speakers per se, but rather learners with a heritage motivation (Polinsky and Kagan, 2007, p. 2).

Silverstein further critiques the notion of heritage language as a reification of essentialist notions linking language to culture in a one-to-one way, an important point in this discussion. However, as pointed out by Bucholtz and Hall (2003), we need to distinguish between “essentialism as theoretical position and as ethnographic fact” (p. 375), and for the communities with which I have worked, the connection between language and cultural identity is strongly felt, often discussed, and a basis for speech community membership even for community members who command none of the heritage language. Given these complications, I alternate among the following terms. When referring to the language from the perspective of the community as a whole (including speakers and non-speakers of the referent language), I will often use the term “endangered language”. When describing perspectives offered by non-speakers of the referent language, I will typically use “heritage language” or “endangered language of heritage” in cases where the fact of endangerment is particularly relevant. And I will use (as I have here) the phrase “referent language” when referring to the language as one to which community members orient in some way, regardless of their status as speakers of that language.

Returning to the question of the application of the term “speech community” to these groups of people who do not share a set of expectations regarding discursive interactions in the referent language (or even, necessarily, in English, the dominant language of conversation among community members), what seems instead to be definitional of such speech communities is both an orientation to a specific (heritage, for most members) language, and a shared set of ideologies whose focus is that endangered language of heritage. In this sense, the communities referred to throughout this paper could be conceptualized as examples of what Avineri (in this volume) refers to as “metalinguistic communities”: communities “of positioned social actors engaged primarily in discourse about language and cultural symbols tied to language”, with the caveat that among the central members of these communities, socialization into language ideologies is conceptualized as taking place co-equally with, rather than taking priority over, socialization into language competence and use. These ideologies emerge dialogically as a form of identity work and, in many cases, the prime motivators of these dialogs aren’t the native speakers of the referent language, but rather language learners and other supporters of revitalization efforts. The interlocutors in these conversations may be elder speakers, fellow non-heritage-language-speaking speech community members, and (as we see in the two cases analyzed below) linguists and other non-speech-community members who play a role in language documentation and revitalization projects. Through this dialogic, iterative process, a particular identity emerges: that of a member of this specific sort of speech community. At the same time, the ideologies themselves emerge and are consolidated through these dialogues.

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