RESISTING LANGUAGE LOSS: THE HUMAN VALUE
OF LOCAL LANGUAGES

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*"We are bigger
than one language."
Jesse Jackson,
Campaign '88*

0. INTRODUCTION

During the coming century, 3000 of the existing 6000 languages will perish and another 2400 will come near to extinction, leaving just 600 languages in the "safe" category of 100,000 speakers or more (Krauss, in Hale *et al.* , 1992). That is to say, ninety percent of the world's languages are imperiled. This means that, If the safety-in-numbers criterion is really correct, and if the critical mass is 100,000, this means that most local languages of North America are endangered; all the languages of Australia are endangered; and, in fact, the same must be said for most, probably all, regions of the world -- in general, local languages are endangered. If the critical mass is set at higher figure -- at a million, say -- then all but 200 to 250 of the world's languages are endangered (Krauss, 1992, *op. cit.*).

But sheer numbers of speakers is not the sole criterion, of course. Many languages with few speakers are in good shape, and many with over 100,000 must be said to be endangered. The latter category probably includes Navajo, normally cited as the safest of all North American indigenous languages. According to Dillon Platero, of the Navajo Academy and the Navajo Language Institute, the Navajo community is now in the unenviable circumstance of having both more speakers and more non-speakers of the ancestral language than ever before (Hill and Zepeda, in Robins and Uhlenbeck, 1991) -- the increase in non-speakers is correctly seen as cause for concern by Platero and other Navajo educators and language scholars. The relative endangerment of a language correlates not only with the size of the speaker population, but with other factors as well, including the age range represented in the speaker population -- the presence or absence of children in that population is a good indication of the range of settings in which the language is used. In his testimony this year on behalf of Senate Bill No. 2044, before Senator Inouye's Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, Michael Krauss suggested the following scale of language viability based on the relative age of speakers. The scale goes from *a* (viable) to *e* (extinct), where *a* represents a language community in which all or many children speak

the local language; *b* a community in which most adults but not most children speak the language; *c* a community in which only older adults speak the language; and *d* a community in which a few of the oldest adults, a language which is nearly extinct. If children is the criterion for safety, then of 156 North American indigenous languages, only 14 are safe; the figure rises to 47 if languages with some child-age speakers are included in the count.

As a person who has been doing field work for more than thirty-five years, I share with many of my colleagues the experience of having worked on languages which are no longer spoken. And I would like to say something here about why I lament the extraordinary and unnatural decline in linguistic and cultural diversity during our time. The essential point that I wish to make in this connection is not very deep or complicated. And it is not original, since it grows out of my experience as a field worker and it is, therefore, almost certainly a part of the shared heritage of linguistic field workers the world over. The point is basically this, that diversity in language and culture is essential to progress in certain important human endeavors.

In fact, I would like to make the point in somewhat stronger terms. It seems to me reasonable to hold that a principal human purpose is the fullest possible use of the mind in creating intellectual wealth. Linguistic and cultural diversity is an enabling condition for the fullest achievement of this purpose, since it is diversity which permits the exploration of the widest range of paths of creation. A mere glance around the world tells us this. Thus, the loss of a language is a certain tragedy for the human purpose.

Linguistic diversity is clearly not something whose future can be taken for granted. Local languages and cultures typically find themselves in great peril in this era, a fact which is amply documented in a number of publications, including the collection of essays assembled in the important book *Endangered Languages* (Robins and Uhlenbeck, 1991). The survival of local languages is a matter which will require the commitment of an extraordinarily wide range of talents, coming both from the local communities themselves and from responsible organizations working in solidarity with them.

In the following sections, I will present two brief illustrations of the idea that linguistic diversity is important to human intellectual life. The first relates to the class of human activities normally thought of as scientific, the second to the class of activities typically considered humanistic.

I will refer to the languages with which I am concerned here as "local languages". By this I mean the class of languages which can, I think, be considered to be among the most endangered. These are the indigenous languages characteristically associated with a particular place and subordinate, in some measure, to a national language or to another, more powerful, local language. Most or all Native American languages in North America belong to

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this category, for example, as do the Aboriginal languages of Australia, the indigenous languages of Nicaragua and much of Northern Mexico, to mention places with which I am personally familiar. There can be little ambiguity concerning the class of languages to which I refer, nor can there be any doubt that the class is represented in all parts of the globe, a fact amply attested in Robins and Uhlenbeck (1991). The present size of the speaker populations in local language communities varies greatly from language to language, of course — ranging from just one remaining fluent speaker, or perhaps a semi-speaker, to thousands of speakers. But I think personally that it is right to see them all as being of equal importance in relation to the aspects of human intellectual life which I will touch on here.

1. THE SCIENTIFIC IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL LANGUAGES

One of the uses to which human intelligence is put is the effort to understand nature, and the scientific study of the human mind itself is a most exciting and dignified tradition forming part of that endeavor. Since the time of the Indian grammarians, at least, knowledge of language has been seen as an aspect of the mind, and the study of the linguistic competence of human beings has been seen as a legitimate and essential part of the general effort to achieve adequate scientific understanding of the mind.

While it is a tenet of modern scientific linguistics that knowledge of grammar stems from a specific universal capacity possessed by human beings by virtue of their genetic heritage, there is within the field an exciting and productive tension between the essential *unity* of human linguistic knowledge, on the one hand, and the rich *diversity* of human languages, on the other. Without knowledge of the latter, we cannot hope to know the former. The truth of this is evident at every turn, and it can be exemplified with examples of the simplest and most straightforward sort.

The point which I intend to make here is well known to linguists, so I will limit my discussion to a single simple example, that of the category of number, as exemplified in such English pairs as *cat/cats, was/were, I/we*. And within this very accessible domain, I will limit my self to the question of what *oppositions* are inherent in it, what *distinctive features*, if you will.

Suppose that English were the only language in the world. What would we be able to learn from that language about the grammatical category of number in relation to the universal human capacity for language? Or to be more specific, would we be able to learn what *is* and what is *not* a possible system of grammatical number? Putting the question in the way linguists usually do, could we determine what *universal grammar* defines as a possible or impossible system of grammatical number oppositions in a natural language?

If English were the only language, we would be safe in assuming that number involves a binary opposition opposing *one* to *more than one*. From English alone, of course, we do not know whether this opposition is *singular* versus *nonsingular* or *plural* versus *nonplural* and the question would seem of little importance, more philosophical than empirical. But we know, anyway, that this English system is not representative of the world's languages. Many languages make a three-way number distinction, as does Hopi, exemplified here by forms of the nouns meaning "woman" and "man":

(1) | Singular | Dual | Plural | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| wu'ti | wu'ti-t | momoya-m | 'woman' |
| taaqa | taaqa-t | ta'taq-t | 'man' |

This suggests the possibility that the category of number is not binary— it could be ternary, for example. And this, in turn, opens the door to the possibility that an indefinite variety of number systems exists, some binary, some ternary, some quaternary, some quinary, and so on. But this does not seem to be true, in actual fact. Rather, systems of the English type and of the Hopi type abound among the world's languages, but systems of other sorts (e.g., systems with a "paucal" or trial number category) are rare. This observation suggests that we should think of the system exemplified by Hopi animate nouns (as in (1) above) as implicating a pair of binary oppositions (or something comparable, using, perhaps, the feature [augmented] instead of [plural]):

(2) (a) [±singular]
     (b) [±plural]

The dual number is the intersection of the negative values of the two features [singular] and [plural]. From two binary features, then, we obtain the observed three-way distinction. And this would be a good move, since the theory involving binary oppositions is constrained in a manner which will permit us to work toward a universal theory of number marking. A theory with n-ary features is unconstrained and accordingly predicts that virtually anything is possible, contrary to observed fact.

However, the binary theory could be wrong, and we have seen no empirical evidence in its favor, apart from the fact that languages are rare which do not conform either to the English one/more-than-one pattern of number opposition or else to the Hopi singular/dual/plural pattern. The question, of course, is whether we can find evidence from languages of the Hopi type that dual is the intersection of the negative values of a *pair* of binary oppositions. Can we find evidence that these two oppositions exist independently? In this connection, consider the following sentences of Hopi:

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(3)   (a)   Pam wari.
                (that   run:PERF)
                'He/she ran.'

        (b)   Puma wari.
                (those run:PERF)
                'They (two) ran.'

        (c)   Puma yu'tu.
                (those run:PERF)
                'They (plural) ran.'

These sentences have pronominal subjects and simple intransitive verbal subjects. The verb undergoes what is called "suppletion" to indicate agreement with the number of the subject. The subjects also appear in different forms, depending on the number category which they mark.

While the sentences of (3) represent a three-way opposition, the subject and the verb each indicate a two-way opposition only. Moreover, the verb and the subject involve different oppositions. Thus we can see clearly here that the dual interpretation of (3b) is due to the intersection of two distinct binary oppositions, one marked overtly only in the subject pronoun, the other only in the verb. Hopi pronouns are distinguished according to the opposition [±singular], while verbs are distinguished as [±plural]. Hopi, therefore, encourages the conviction that dual number is due to the intersection of two binary oppositions.

The example presented in this section is one of many that could be offered to illustrate the importance of the study of linguistic diversity within the general linguistic program whose purpose is the development of an adequate theory of natural language. The examples are drawn from one of the most accessible areas of grammar. But while the category of number is accessible, in an obvious sense, its surface realization across languages exhibits great diversity, and no single language presents the observable data which will permit us to get at the fundamental character of the oppositions involved and, thereby, to come closer to an understanding of the universal organization and "inventories" of the grammatical category, and the same is true of grammatical categories in general.

The example of grammatical number is a tiny example of the tension inherent in the scientific study of grammar — i.e., the seemingly paradoxical circumstance that we must look at diversity in order to discover what is universal, and therefore uniform, in human linguistic knowledge. Diversity matters in the area represented by this brief example, but it is in fact essential to progress in every area of grammatical research.

2. LOCAL LANGUAGES AND THE EXPRESSION OF INTELLECTUAL LIFE

The world's linguistic diversity is a precious resource. The truth of this does not derive solely from linguistic science, of course. Language is much more than grammar. The term "language" embraces a wide range of human capacities, and it is not clear that it makes sense to think of it as a single entity.

Of supreme significance in relation to linguistic diversity, and to local languages in particular, is the simple truth that language — in the general, multifaceted sense — embodies the intellectual wealth of the people who use it. A language and the intellectual productions of its speakers are often inseparable, in fact. Some forms of verbal art—verse, song, or chant—depend crucially on morphological and phonological, even syntactic, properties of the language in which it is formed. In such cases, the art could not exist without the language, quite literally. Even where the dependency is not so organic as this, an intellectual tradition may be so thoroughly a part of a people's linguistic ethnography as to be, in effect, inseparable from the language.

The loss of local languages, and of the cultural systems which they express, has meant irretrievable loss of diverse and interesting intellectual wealth, the priceless products of human mental industry. The process of language loss is on-going. Many linguistic field workers have had, and will continue to have, the experience of bearing witness to the loss, for all time, of a language and of the cultural products which the language served to express for the intellectual nourishment of its speakers.

In this section, I would like to describe one such product of a people's intellectual work. This is a tradition whose decline and virtual disappearance I witnessed in the course of field work in Australia. It was the treasure of a small group of Australian Aboriginal people, the Lardil, living on Mornington Island in North Queensland.

While working on the syntax and lexicon of Lardil in 1960, I heard of the existence of an auxiliary language, called Damin, which some initiated men in the community could still use. Most men could not, since the missionaries who were in power on Mornington Island during the early decades of this century had forbidden the practice of initiation many years earlier, and it was in the context of initiation that Damin was learned. Only men initiated before the mission was established had the opportunity to learn Damin, and only a few of those men were still living in 1960.

I was not able to work on Damin until 1967. An anthropologist working with the Lardil people sent me a tape of Damin while I was working in another community farther south. When I heard the tape, I knew that Damin was

something very special, so I arranged to visit Mornington Island again. The feature of Damin which first caught my attention was its phonology. It departs drastically from the phonology of Lardil, and it has sounds in it which do not exist in any other Australian language. For example, it has click consonants, otherwise found only in Africa — in the Khoisan languages, for example, and in the Nguni languages of the Bantu family. There is no historical connection between the Lardil and these African languages. The use of clicks in Damin developed locally. Damin has the appearance of an invented language, and it is attributed, in fact, to a legendary figure named Kalthad (Yellow Trevally). If it was invented, then it is a clever invention, indeed, because it is almost unheard of for an invented language to depart radically from the phonological constraints of the ordinary language of the inventor. The impression that Damin is an invention is strengthened by the fact that it not only has sounds absent elsewhere in Australia, but it also has sounds found nowhere else in the world — as true phonological segments, that is. These include an ingressive voiceless lateral and a labio-velar lingual ejective.

Although its sound system is spectacular, the extraordinary genius of Damin is to be found in its lexicon. In its original purpose, Damin was an "auxiliary language," in the sense that it was used in place of Lardil when this was necessary for ritual reasons. An idea of its nature can be gained from a consideration of how it was learned and used. According to the accounts of surviving Demiinkurlda, or "Damin-possessors", as they were called, Damin was learned by novices in the advanced phase of men's initiation. Men who went through this stage were called Warama, and in theory, only Warama learned Damin. In practice, however, since it was used in public, many people who were not Warama, both men and women, had passive knowledge of it. Its purpose, apart from the intellectual pleasure it gave, was to serve as a vehicle of communication between Warama and all individuals involved in their initiation. The use of ordinary Lardil with these people was forbidden, until they had been repaid the ritual debt owed to them by the Warama as a result of initiation. Damin is a lexicon, not an entire language. The rule in using Damin correctly is this: each lexical item of Lardil must be replaced by a Damin item; the inflectional morphology and syntax of Lardil remains intact. An example of this lexical replacement procedure can be seen in (4) below, in which the first line is in Lardil, the second is the Damin equivalent, and the third is a literal gloss of the morphemes in the sentence:

(4)   Ngithun dunji-kan ngawa waang-kur werneng-kiyath-ur.
       n!aa   n!n!a-kan nh!nh!u tiitith-ur m!ii-ngkiyath-ur.
       (my   WiYBro-GEN dog   go-FUT   food-GO-FUT)
       'My wife's younger brother's dog is going hunting (lit. going for food).'

As this example shows, the syntax and morphology of Damin and Lardil are the same. Both use the same case system. The genitive (glossed GEN) is exemplified here, as well as the nominative, which is not overtly marked —*ngawa, nh!nh!u* 'dog' is in the nominative. And the two share the same system of verbal tenses — the future, glossed FUT, is seen here. And finally, they use the same system of derivational morphology, exemplified here by the verb-forming allative ending *-(ng)kiya-* (glossed GO). This element converts the noun *werne, m!ii* 'food' into a verb meaning 'to go after food, to hunt'.

While the morphology is the same for Lardil and Damin, the lexicon is totally different. Thus, each noun, verb, or pronoun in the Lardil of (4) matches a distinct item in Damin. It is the nature of this replacement lexicon which is extraordinary. It is constructed in such a way that, in principle, it can be learned in one day. It can be learned in one day, yet, in combination with Lardil syntax and morphology, it can be used to express virtually any idea. How can a lexicon be *small* enough to learn in one day and, at the same time, be *rich* enough to express all ideas? A moment's reflection on this question can only inspire admiration, in my judgment.

The answer, of course, is abstractness. The Damin lexicon cannot be rich in the usual sense of having large numbers of lexical items denoting concepts of great specificity (like the ordinary Lardil or English vocabularies, for example). Rather, the richness of Damin is of a different sort, the opposite of this in fact. Damin lexical items are abstract names for logically cohesive families of concepts. The richness of Damin resides in the semantic breadth of its lexical items, permitting a small inventory (less than 200 items) to accommodate the same range of concepts as does the much larger ordinary vocabulary (of unknown size).

The example given in (4) above can be used to illustrate the basic point of Damin abstractness. Consider the first word of that sentence. In Lardil, this is a form of the first person singular pronoun, and, as such, it is involved in a rich complex of oppositions expressed by a set of 19 distinct pronouns. There are three persons, three numbers (singular, dual, plural), an inclusive-exclusive distinction in the first person dual and plural, and in all non-singular pronouns there is a two-way distinction among the pronouns for generation harmony. There can be little doubt that ordinary Lardil is rich, in the sense of highly specific, in this domain. By contrast, Damin reduces all of this to a single binary opposition:

(5)   (a) n!aa 'ego'
          (b) n!uu 'alter'

The first of these is used to refer to any set which includes the speaker, including the set which includes only the speaker. The second refers to any set which does not include the speaker. Incidentally, these two forms illustrate one

of the click consonants of Damin. All Damin clicks are nasalized. That is to say, the velar occlusion associated with the production of clicks is released as a velar nasal. In this case, the click articulation itself (symbolized !) is in the alveopalatal position (symbolized by using [n] for the nasal component). The other clicks are the dental [nh!], as in the word for 'dog', and the bilabial [m!], as in the word for 'food'. In some items, the click is reduplicated, as in the words for 'dog' and 'wife's younger brother'.

The abstraction represented by (5) is actually greater than what I have indicated, since the entire set of determiners (i.e., demonstratives, as well as pronouns) is subsumed in this opposition. This means that each of (5a, b) is more abstract that any of the actual Lardil words which it covers. There is, in ordinary Lardil, no single word which corresponds either to (5a) or to (5b). Nor is it likely that there is any such word in English, or any other language, for that matter, setting aside the highly technical vocabularies of fields in which deictic reference is of central importance (e.g., *ego* and *alter* of kinship studies, a close, but not exact correspondence).

The domain of time is analyzed in the same fashion. Thus temporal reference, like pronominal reference, employs a fundamental binary classification, opposing the present to all other times:

(6)   (a) kaa 'present, now'
      (b) kaawi 'other than present, other than now'

The first of these terms is used in place of Lardil words such as *yanda* 'now, today' and *ngardu* 'presently', while the second corresponds to such words as *bilaa* 'recently (in the past)', *bilaanku* 'tomorrow', and *diwarrku* 'yesterday'. Again, the terminology here involves an abstract classification of the domain, and each of the terms is more abstract than any Lardil lexical item.

Our example sentence (4) contains further examples of abstraction. The term *nh!nh!u* 'dog', is one of the few terms in Damin that refers to a narrow class of entities (the class of canines, dingos and dogs). It would appear to be a counterexample to the general principle of abstraction. However, the term is, in fact, used to refer to an abstract set, that of domestic animals — it combines with *ngaa*, a term refering generally to animate beings, especially humans, and to mortality, to form *ngaa-nh!nh!u* 'horse', and it combines with *wiijburr*, a term referring to wooded plants, to form *wiijburr-nh!nh!u* 'cattle' The study of the semantics of Damin compounds is in its infancy, I am afraid, and it is not clear how the components of the compounds just cited yield the meanings given. It is clear, however, that *nh!nh!u* refers to domestic animals in general. And, as usual, this usage is not matched by that of any Lardil lexical item.

Sentence (4) also illustrates the most abstract of the Damin verbal lexical items, *tiiti* 'act'. This is the generalized active verb in Damin. It corresponds to

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both transitive and intransitive verbs of Lardil — e.g., *jitha* 'eat', *jidma* 'lift', *kirrkala* 'put', *matha* 'get, take', *murrwa* 'follow', *wutha* 'give', *wungi* 'steal', *jatha* 'enter', *kangka* 'speak', *lerri* 'drip', *waa* 'go'. The Damin verb is used in reference to activities other than those resulting in harmful effects. Verbs of harmful effect are represented in Damin by *titi*, with a short initial syllable, rather than the long syllable of the generalized activity verb. However slight this phonological difference might seem to be, it is real and rigidly observed in Damin usage —*titi* corresponds to such Lardil verbs as *barrki* 'chop', *betha* 'bite', *bunbe* 'shoot', *derlde* 'break', *kele* 'cut', *netha* 'hit'. This does not exhaust the verbal inventory of Damin, but it covers the vast majority of active verbs in Lardil. And each of these Damin verbs is, as expected, more abstract than any Lardil verb.

While abstraction is the general rule in Damin, exceeding that of Lardil lexical items, in some cases the Damin terminology corresponds to abstract terms in Lardil itself. This is particularly true in certain domains having to do with foods. Thus, the Damin term *m!ii* applies to foods in general, particularly vegetable foods, and corresponds closely to the Lardil term *werne* 'food'. Likewise, certain seafoods are classed in the Lardil manner— thus, *l*ii* 'boney fishes' (with *l** representing the ingressive lateral consonant) corresponds to Lardil *yaka*; Damin *thii* 'cartilaginous fishes, sharks and stingrays' corresponds to Lardil *thurarra*; and Damin *thuu* corresponds to the interesting heterogenous Lardil class *kendabal* 'sea turtles and dugongs'.

The Damin lexicon must achieve a balance between abstraction and expressive power, since it must satisfy two essentially contradictory requirements. It must be such that it can be learned quickly and, at the same time, it must be such that it can be used, in cooperation with Lardil inflectional morphology and syntax, to express any idea which Lardil itself can be used to express. It cannot be *too* abstract, therefore.

The extent to which this balance is achieved can be appreciated through an examination of the system to which the Damin kinship term *n!n!a*, also exemplified in (4), belongs. This term is used in (4) to render the Lardil term *dunja* 'junior brother-in-law'. Of course, as expected, the Damin term is in fact more general than any actual Lardil kinship term. The entire Lardil kinship system — which, like most Australian systems, is terminologically enormous — is reduced to the five Damin terms charted below:

(7)   kuu   =   n!n!a
           |
         thungaa   =   kuu
                             |
         kungaa   =   jii
           |
         kungaa   =   kuu

To understand this system, place yourself in the upper lefthand corner. That is the class to which your siblings belong — thus, you call your brothers and sisters *kuu*. Your spouse and his or her siblings are directly opposite, joined by the symbol =, as usual in kinship charts. Thus, a man calls his wife and her siblings *n!n!a*, and correspondingly, a woman calls her husband and his siblings by the same term. A man calls his children and his father, and his father's siblings, *thungaa*; the bar (|) links father-child connections generally. One's mother is located in the column opposite to one's own (i.e, in the opposite "patrimoiety"), one row down — thus, your mother and her siblings are called *kuu*, the same as your own siblings (corresponding to the fact that you all belong to the same "matrimoiety"). The mother-child links follow this logic generally — opposite column, one row down. Applying this set of principles consistently to the chart in (7), it is possible to assign a Damin term to any person for whom a biological connection can be traced, actually or theoretically, no matter how distant. This terminology is based on an "eight subsection" classificatory system. It uses a biological model for calculation, though the terminology is "classificatory" and is not dependent on actual biological connections — though if these are in fact known, they will be used in determining how the terms should be applied in a given instance. In accordance with the principles inherent in this terminology, ones mother's mother's brother's daughter's child is *n!n!a*, a member of the class to which one's spouse belongs, in the preferred (second cross-cousin) marriage pattern. And ones mother's brother's child is called *jii*, and includes the class of people to which a spouse belongs according to the less favored alternative (first cross-cousin) marriage pattern.

A moment's reflection on this system will probably give rise to the natural question of why the number of Damin kinship terms is five, rather than two, four, or eight. The question is natural because the logic of the system suggests even numbers — four, say, would be appropriately abstract; eight might violate the principle of abstractness. The answer to this question, I believe, reveals the genius of Damin, i.e., the balance between abstractness and expressive adequacy. Reduction to four terms would force a merger in the most important distinction within the kinship system. This is a *subsection* system, containing eight classes of kinsmen. The key ingredient in the subsection system is the distinction between kinsmen related through the second (fourth, sixth, etc.) generation from those related through the first (third, fifth, etc.) generation. That is, it distinguishes kinsmen related through *harmonic* generations from those related throught *dysharmonic* generations. Systems which merge this distinction, also widespread in Australia, are called *section* systems. The beauty of Damin is that it expresses generation harmony precisely where it is most important in relation to alliances within the community — i.e., in classifying one's cross-cousins, thereby defining the set of potential spouses in the preferred marriage aliance. The generation harmony distinctions are merged where they are less crucial to the expressive efficiency of the terminology. Therefore, Damin has fewer terms than the eight implied by the subsection system, in keeping with the principle of abstraction.

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The auxiliary language of the Lardil people is an intellectual treasure of enormous worth. It has not been studied in depth, and it is not clear that it will be possible, ever, to give an adequate picture of its structure. It is clear from what we know that it involves a sophisticated semantic analysis of the lexical resources of Lardil. The system of abstractions lays bare aspects of lexical semantic structure to a degree which, quite possibly, is not achieved by any other system of analysis which attempts to accommodate an *entire* vocabulary.

The last fluent user of Damin passed away several years ago. The destruction of this intellectual treasure was carried out, for the most part, by people who were not aware of its existence, coming as they did from a culture in which wealth is physical and visible. Damin was not visible for them, and as far as they were concerned, the Lardil people had no wealth, apart from their land. This visibility problem was overcome only at the last hour, when Doug Belcher, an extremely enlightened superintendent, with great intelligence and at considerable risk to his position at Mornington, struggled valiantly to create an environment in which the aboriginal wealth of the island could regain its position of dignity in the life of the community. His efforts led eventually to the real possibility of the resumption of initiations and of a role for local languages in the educational system. In the context of the atmosphere which Belcher initiated, efforts were later made to produce tapes for Damin which would be available to Lardil young men, and an elementary dictionary of Lardil, with an appendix on Damin, was produced. It is not yet clear what effect these developments will have in relation to the intellectual traditions of the Lardil people. They have, however, had an important effect on the Kayardilt community, a refugee people from Bentinck Island, whose language is still very strong and whose intellectual traditions can form a central part of the education of the school-age population.

We cannot say that the Damin tradition is utterly lost to the Lardil people. However, it is all but gone, since revival of it would be from recorded sources, and if revival were to be attempted, a *new* Damin tradition would be initiated, necessarily, since the cultural context of the original tradition is irrecoverable — there are no survivors of that period. The development of a new Damin tradition is not a bad thing, of course, in fact it would be an exciting thing. But the old Damin tradition is effectively lost. And the destruction of this tradition must be ranked as a disaster, comparable to the destruction of any human treasure.

It is perhaps of little use simply to bemoan the loss of a treasure. The example of Damin is offered as an instance of the nature of things that have been lost and of what can be lost if linguistic and cultural diversity disappears. In the case of Australia, we cannot know what has been lost in regions where Aboriginal cultures no longer thrive — the wealth there was mental, not physical. But if the remaining diversity in Australia is not safeguarded, we know that we stand to lose a lot, including the language-based traditions of verse, and a living tradition of antonymy in Central Australia embodying a semantic

analysis of lexical items along the lines of Damin. The same is true in all areas where local languages are spoken.

The safeguarding of linguistic and cultural diversity does not guarantee the perpetuation of existing traditions of intellectual endeavor, of course. In fact, a living tradition implies change. And it is precisely the development of new traditions which is most consonant with the human purpose. And it is precisely where local languages are viable that new traditions develop. Thus, for example, in the Southwest of the United States, beside the continuing traditions of sung verse, a new tradition of poetry is developing, in Papago, Pima, Yaqui, and Hualapai, for example, in the context of the growing use of the written form of these languages. Similarly, in Nicaragua, there is an increasing use of Miskitu and Sumu in the writing of prose and in composing lyrics for popular music. In these regions, and in many others, new traditions of language use are developing and growing. Their success will depend, of course, on a continuing position of strength for the languages involved.

3. ON RESISTING LANGUAGE LOSS

In the preceding sections, I have presented a somewhat self-serving perspective on the human costs of the observed decline in linguistic and cultural diversity. It is the point of view of a person who is professionally involved with language and whose field of study is seriously threatened by language loss. So I have not said anything about the personal costs of language loss, the grief felt by countless numbers of people who have been prevented, for one reason or another, from acquiring the language, or languages, of their parents, or the grief of parents who, for one reason or another, have not been able to give to their children the full portion of linguistic tradition which they themselves possessed. Those who experience this grief are the immediate human victims of language loss. And their experience, as much as any other consideration, is good reason to resist language loss.

To reverse language loss, ultimately, a certain condition must prevail. In short, people must have the *choice* of learning or transmitting the local language of their family, or other relevant social unit. In some cases, of course, this choice is directly denied to people, by an oppressive authority. Often now, however, the choice is effectively removed by other factors, specifically, economic factors. Choice is severely reduced where it is not economically feasible for the members of a local language community to stay together. In many cases, this boils down to the simple observation that if you can work where you talk your local language, your choice in the matter of promoting that language is greatly enhanced. Otherwise, your freedom of choice in the matter is virtually nil, except by dint of an extraordinary act of will, sometimes seen in the case of parents who simply insist that their language be used in the nuclear family, in defiance, so to speak, of the otherwise prevailing dominant language.

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In many of the documented cases of language loss, one or another of the factors just mentioned could, arguably, be cited as a factor. Lardil and Damin clearly represent the situation of an oppressive authority which, in this instance, achieved its ends by separating the children from their parents and elders, and brothers from sisters, and by imposing English as the sole language of the school and dormitory. But the economic factor, broadly conceived, is perhaps the greatest contributor to language decline now. In many cases, economic considerations have forced individuals and families to separate from their local language communities, with the result that their descendants have been effectively deprived of the choice of learning the local language of their parents and forebears. This has been the situation of many North American local language communities. The alarming decline of Navajo, still the leader in absolute speaker population for North America, is due in part to this mechanism. By comparison, the relatively greater strength of the numerically much smaller Jemez community, is almost certainly due to the fact that it is possible, economically, for a significant number of Jemez speakers to live together in the same village.

I believe that it is necessary to extend the term "economic" to cover a situation which may well be just as important in explaining language loss as are the official suppression of linguistic choice and the economically forced emigration of local language speakers. The situation I have in mind stems from the extraordinary pressure which a dominant language puts on a local language, even where the speakers of the latter are able to live together in the same community. The pressure comes, not, of course, from the dominant language itself, but from the subtle and not-so-subtle propaganda of the associated economically dominant culture and society which encourages speakers of local languages to believe that their futures depend on switching from their native languages to the dominant one. Typically, the propaganda encourages the belief that a choice is not viable — the choice of retaining the local language is thought to be incompatible with the "proper vision" of the future. I am sure that I am not alone in having heard this argument many times in the course of doing field work in local language communities. The pressure involved here is fundamentally economic pressure, I believe, and its role in language decline belongs, therefore, to the category of economic factors, with economically forced emigration.

Essentially, the factors which I have mentioned here are factors which limit choice — the choice to maintain and propagate one's native language. The condition which must prevail in order to halt language loss is a form of sociopolitical and economic justice in which this choice is *not* limited. This necessary condition does not obtain in any country I know about, certainly not in the United States, where local language endangerment is an extremely serious matter.

The necessary condition for halting language loss, globally, or in the United States, say, is certainly not something that we will see in our lifetime. But this is just a fact of the world and cannot be allowed to get in the way of efforts on behalf of local languages. The hard work of local language planning and development must go on, as it has been going on, in the context of the particular, usually unique, situations of local language communities — like the Hualapai bilingual education program, described in the essay by Zepeda and Hill in *Endangered Languages*. (Robins and Uhlenbeck, 1991). This kind of work must be done in any event — it amounts to an effort to *resist* language loss, in the absence of the condition which would be necessary to *halt* it utterly. If this work is not done now, all will be lost, I think, well before true advances are made in bringing about the conditions of sociopolitical and economic justice necessary for freedom of choice in maintaining and promoting local languages — the choice will be gone, because the languages will be gone. Work in the effort to resist language loss, it is reasonable to hope, can have the effect of retarding language decline.

4. ON CHOICE: THE CASE OF ULWA

The use of the term *choice* implies that there could be situations in which the choice is actually free — that there is the freedom to perpetuate a local language or not to perpetuate it. Generally, I would argue, in the world as it actually is, the choice is not free. There is, instead, pressure to make a particular choice — and that usually goes against the local language in favor of a dominant one.

But sometimes the situation is not very clear. One such is represented by the Ulwa (Southern Sumu) language of Karawala, on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. Ulwa belongs to the small Misumalpan family, together with its close Sumu relative (Northern Sumu) and its much more distant relative Miskitu, the indigenous *lingua franca* of the Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast. For all intents and purposes, Ulwa is only spoken by residents of Karawala. The town has about 800 residents, of whom 600 or so are considered to be Ulwa. The language of the town is Miskitu, and there is a Miskitu-Spanish bilingual-intercultural education program, albeit of insecure funding. Karawala is near the mouth of the Río Grande de Matagalpa, in the southern part of the Atlantic Coast region generally associated with the Miskitu language and people. Miskitu is universal among indigenous people of the area. It has official status in the Nicaraguan constitution, though Spanish is the official language which is necessarily taught in the schools, and Spanish is the language one must know to advance in education beyond the elementary grades.

All speakers of Ulwa are fully fluent in Miskitu, and most of the day-to-day business of the town of Karawala is carried out in Miskitu. Bilingual Ulwa-Miskitu speakers are impressive in their command of Ulwa, their being no real difference in fluency, so far as we can tell. It would seem, considering just this bilingual population, that we have a situation in which the people have chosen to continue speaking Ulwa, in addition to the dominant Miskitu. But in 1987, in the

context of the progressive programs of the Autonomy Project, representatives of the Ulwa community asked the Sandinista Government for a language program in support of the Ulwa language, which they perceived as endangered. They had in mind a program on the model of the very successful language rescue project for the Rama (cf. the piece by Colette Craig in Hale *et al.*., 1992). Rama is a Nicaraguan Chibchan language spoken farther to the south on the Atlantic Coast; it has perhaps two dozen speakers remaining, out of a population of nine hundred, or so, whose native language is a form of English, referred to as Rama Creole. Though the situation of the original Rama language is without question more grave than that of Ulwa, speakers of the latter saw the Rama community as very fortunate in having a language program which might help to safeguard their linguistic tradition. Their concern was taken seriously, and an Ulwa language program was started in 1988, with a six-member committee and working team, consisting of three younger speakers (also teachers in the school) and three elder speakers. From the beginning, it has received two yearly visits from two linguists, myself and Tom Green, also of MIT. The initial program of the project had basically two aims, to prepare a dictionary (and eventually a grammar) of Ulwa, and to record the oral history and traditional stories of the Ulwa of Karawala. The members of UYUTMUBAL, the Ulwa Language Committee, have constructed a house in which to work, and they hold regular meetings to carry out the work of the project, i.e., to write down and tape stories and to add entries to the growing dictionary, now approaching its third edition.

The precise condition of Ulwa is not easy to determine. All speakers we know speak it extremely well, and many of these are young — in their twenties. There are, so far as we can tell, no "semi-speakers". But the health of the language depends not on what the speakers know but rather on who speaks. What is the cut-off? How young are the youngest speakers? To get some idea of this, the Committee took a language census of the children representing one of the sections of each of the six grades of the Karawala school. The results are partially set out in (8) below:

(8) **Ulwa-speaking School Children, Karawala, 1989:**

Grade	Number of Pupils	Ulwa Speakers	Percentage
1st	58	2	3.4
2nd	29	5	17.2
3rd	25	7	28.0
4th	17	5	29.0
5th	13	5	38.4
6th	11	3	27.2

The census asked the pupils what language they spoke with each of the following categories of people: (1) mother, (2) father, (3) siblings, (4) friends, and (5) grandparents. The two Ulwa-speaking first graders indicated that they spoke Ulwa to their mothers only. The five second graders spoke Ulwa either with a parent or with a grandparent, as did the seven third graders — though two of these, from the same family, also spoke Ulwa with a sibling. The five fourth

graders spoke Ulwa with a grandparent, and two spoke also with a parent. The fifth graders spoke Ulwa with a parent, and one of them also spoke with a grandparent. Finally, the sixth graders spoke Ulwa with a one or both parents, and one spoke also with a grandparent. Where a pupil spoke with a single parent only, it was generally the mother. In many cases, however, this reflects either the economic emigration of men or the effect of the Contra war, which resulted in the loss of many men from the Atlantic Coast communities. Several children indicated that they spoke English, one of the languages of the Coast, or Spanish, with one or more members of their families. Overwhelmingly, however, the language used by these children was Miskitu.

The meaning of these figures is not entirely clear, except in the most general terms. It would appear that the percentage of Ulwa speakers increases in the higher grades. If this represents anything like a true picture, then there are many possible explanations, each of which would have to be pursued to get to the bottom of the matter. But the apparent correlation may be entirely accidental, a reflection of the fact that the size of the classes decreases as the grade gets higher. This is a well-known condition in community schools on the Atlantic Coast. But suppose it *is* a real correlation. What could it mean? Perhaps young Ulwa people actually learn Ulwa, their "native" language, in later years, i.e., as a second language, in effect — this is not an unheard of situation. Or perhaps it means that the higher grades, in the Karawala of 1989, represented the youngest of an "older generation" of Ulwa speakers, people belonging to a generation in which the languages was still utilized in the home? None of this can be determined by staring at the figures we have at this point.

What appears to be true is that Miskitu has assumed the dominant position as the language of general use in Karawala. Everyone knows and uses Miskitu. By contrast, among school children, at least, very few use Ulwa in speaking to the people closest to them. The central question is not settled, however. How many school children *know* Ulwa? What choice is Karawala making, in general? Are the young people of Karawala choosing to put Ulwa aside in favor of Miskitu?

There is, I think, an interesting reason why this question cannot be answered on the basis of numbers such as those set out in (8). There is reason to believe that, despite appearances, Ulwa has not really been set aside, as yet. The relation between Miskitu and Ulwa is very special — it is not like the relation between, say, English and Spanish. English is genetically related to Spanish, of course, and Miskitu is genetically related to Ulwa (i.e., it is related to the Sumu languages). But the fact of these genetic relationships is not directly relevant to the issue at hand. The relation between Ulwa and Miskitu, genetically speaking, is perhaps as distant as that between Spanish and English. The relation might even be more distant. But the special relationship comes about another way, independently of the genetic. Miskitu has been in intimate contact with Sumu for a long time, particularly during and since the period of British commerce and piracy on the

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Atlantic Coast. Mutually advantageous arrangements made between the Miskitu and the British gave the former great military and economic power, permitting them to dominate the Sumu tribes to the west and to assimilate Sumu elements into their society. In all probability, segments of entire Sumu communities were captured and assimilated in this manner — early travelers report villages that were, linguistically, part Miskitu and part Sumu. As a consequence of this process, Sumu came to have an enormous effect on Miskitu, probably through the agency of Sumu women, whose effect on the linguistic form of Miskitu would certainly be strong, in a fashion closely paralleling that in which Khoisan elements came to be integral features of the Nguni languages of the Bantu family. Entire sections of the Sumu lexicon were borrowed virtually wholesale, e.g., the color terms, clearly Sumu in origin, as shown by their inflection (involving an element otherwise entirely absent from Miskitu); and the pronouns, a system normally impervious to borrowing. Thus, Miskitu and Sumu have an important part of their history in common. The borrowings indicate that the primary contact was between Northern Sumu and Miskitu. Ulwa is Southern Sumu. But the typological and genetic remove which separates Northern and Southern Sumu is not great. And if Miskitu is, in the special sense described above, "close" to Northern Sumu, then it is close to Ulwa as well. In fact, our experience at Karawala — in compiling the dictionary, with ample exemplification in sentences, and in assembling material for a grammar — gives us to understand that Miskitu and Ulwa are extraordinarily close, in a certain sense. They are close in a way which Spanish and English, or even Spanish and Portuguese, or English and Danish or Frisian, are definitely *not* close.

It is only a slight exaggeration to say the following about Miskitu and Ulwa. They are a single grammar with distinct lexicons and (derivational and inflectional) morpheme inventories. In general, if you can say it in Miskitu, you can say it in Ulwa (if you know the lexical items and the morphology), and vice versa. In this respect, the relation between Miskitu and Ulwa is much like that between Lardil and Damin, except that the bound morphemes, like the lexical items, are distinct in form. This is emphatically *not* the sort of relation which holds between Spanish and Portuguese, English and Frisian, and so on.

In a certain rather clear sense, Ulwa continues to be used in Karawala -- not merely by those who *obviously* use it, in the sense that they use its lexicon and morphology, but also by those who use Miskitu vocabulary. This follows, since, with some minor exceptions, Ulwa and Miskitu share the same grammar. Thus, to restore Ulwa to use in Karawala, it would be sufficient, basically, to restore use of the lexicon and morphology.

While this has obvious implications for the program of the Ulwa Language Committee, there are many questions which remain. There are questions having to do with what the Committee's program *should* be. At the moment, the interest is primarily in documenting "the language", i.e., the lexicon, and the history and oral traditions of the community. While a grammar will be written, that is

primarily our interest, not theirs. The fact that young people do not use Ulwa extensively is often commented upon, but it is not obviously lamented, and there are conflicting ideas, on the Committee, and elsewhere, concerning the extent to which the language is lost among the young. Some people have even told us that most young people know the language, a proposition which clearly conflicts with what we observe. And I must say, I have been confused by certain observations. People who are generally regarded as non-Ulwa, have proven to be very knowledgeable about the language, understanding it quite well, and producing it reasonably well also — one such person is the Miskitu wife of an Ulwa Language Committee member, and another is a young girl, not known to us as an Ulwa-speaker, who suddenly demonstrated that she could read and understand the Ulwa dialogue of a small conversation textbook prepared for possible use in the school.

In general, we feel that Ulwa is very accessible to the young people of Karawala. They "almost know it." All that is needed is a good reason for them to begin using it again. And we plan, in cooperation with the Committee, to perform an experiment. In the past, all of the literature produced in the project has been provided with a translation, generally in Miskitu, but sometimes in Spanish. We would like now to produce a piece of literature, in Ulwa alone, without translation. We will pick something which will appeal to young people, a medium-length book known to be successful among Central Americans (but unknown to residents of Karawala, generally). A small number of copies of the translation will be reproduced, in as attractive a format as possible. The copies will be housed in the "Ulwa House," and its availability there will be publicized, perhaps through public readings. The target population is literate in Miskitu, which is written with the same orthography as that which the Committee adopted for Ulwa. The book will have pictures illustrating the text, so that no potential reader will be totally at sea. However, there will be no Miskitu or Spanish translation, and readers will have to struggle with the Ulwa.

We expect two results from this book, at least. It will uncover many young people who have some command of Ulwa, people not yet known to us. It will generate interest in Ulwa, not only among Ulwa-speakers but also among people who are primarly speakers of Miskitu, and some of these, we believe, will attempt to learn the language, a relatively easy task for Miskitu-speakers, for the reasons mentioned above.

I have taken the time to sketch the Ulwa Language Project here for two reasons. For one thing, I hoped to provide an illustration of a language situation in which the concept of choice is not entirely fictional. There seem to have been real choices in the case of Ulwa, and it seems to me that many interesting choices remain. The outcome is by no means clear. And despite surface appearances, it is not at all clear that the future in Karawala will be a future which excludes Ulwa.

Secondly, I wanted to cite the case of Ulwa in order to illustrate what I perceive to be an important fact in relation to endangered languages and possible programs in support of them. The case of Ulwa is *unique*. Surely, the situation of no other language exactly duplicates that of Ulwa, though features are shared with it, to be sure. In fact, however, the situation of every language is unique — no situation is an exact duplicate of that in which Lardil and Damin find themselves, nor is any the same as that of Hualapai, or Navajo, or Jemez. This simple fact, it seems to me, is fundamental to the general program whose aim is to safeguard and promote local languages. Each language, in effect, will require its own approach, its own program. And this is appropriate, since the core personnel in successful local language programs will be made up of people from the local language communities.

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