

How far can the language ecology metaphor take us? A Pacific perspective on language vitality

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In this response to Mufwene's target article we discuss the benefits and disadvantages of extending the ecology metaphor into studies of language vitality, focusing on contexts from the South Pacific. We show that an ecological perspective allows us to focus on the local and particular and can help us to avoid a simplistic reliance on broad phenomena such as 'globalization' to account for language endangerment and loss (LEL). However, we contend that this endeavor runs the risk of abstracting away from the human experience of LEL into a 'survival of the fittest' or 'balance sheet' approach. We conclude that, while it has benefits, the ecology metaphor does not ultimately offer a compelling basis for an over-arching theory of language vitality.

Keywords: ecology, vitality, endangerment, loss, globalization, colonization, Pacific

1. INTRODUCTION. The use of the ecology metaphor in linguistics is generally traced to Haugen (1972), who defined the ecology of language as 'the study of interactions between any given language and its environment' (1972:325), with 'environment' glossed as the society in which the language is used. This definition opened up a relatively broad and interdisciplinary line of enquiry, but it was not until the early 1990s that the terms 'linguistic ecology' and 'ecology of language' began to be used with any frequency (Chen 2016). Foregrounding the environment, or society, in which languages are spoken has helped shift the focus to the phenomenon of linguistic diversity as something more than the presence of multiple languages, highlighting the connectivity between languages, as well as between languages and their speakers.

Mufwene's work since 2001 has very much centred on this notion of ecology. He conceptualizes languages as cultural tools that are used, adapted and discarded according to the changing circumstances of their speakers, describing languages as parasitic species that depend on the actions of those who use them (Mufwene 2003). He uses concepts from biology to refer to language loss as an outcome of competition and selection between languages to fulfil the same function, particularly as the vernacular of a population. He notes, however, that competition in a linguistic sense implies no animacy in languages, but rather the ranking for usefulness that is carried out by speakers, leading to the selection of particular languages to meet their needs, through deliberate if not necessarily conscious decisions (Mufwene 2013). He conceives of such choices as adaptive responses to changes in the socioeconomic ecologies in which they

participate, in other words the necessary responses that speakers must make to ensure their survival and success. He asserts that people themselves are not endangered by the loss of particular languages, and that, if cultural practices are lost, this is because they are no longer considered useful for the population. From this perspective, he sees attempts by linguists to preserve and revitalize languages as inappropriate unless the ecologies in which these languages are spoken are also preserved and revitalized in such a way that continuing to use the languages would be an adaptive, rather than maladaptive, response.

Mufwene's target article in this issue builds on a number of these arguments. He traces his concerns back to an LSA symposium and special issue of *Language* in which Krauss (1992) suggested some figures for moribund and severely endangered languages in different parts of the world, compared the situation with that of endangered biological species, and called on linguists to react to what he described as the 'catastrophic destruction of the linguistic world' (Krauss 1992:7). A quarter of a century on, Mufwene refers to work from the field of macroecology concerned with sustainability of species, and asks, 'Can we say today that a similar research area has developed in linguistics, one that can inform our discourse on language vitality?' He argues that insufficient thinking has been done about the causes of language endangerment and loss, leading to 'weak theoretical underpinnings' of the field. He asks whether we have a satisfactory explanation for language endangerment and loss (henceforth LEL), and whether we even know that populations are necessarily disadvantaged by the loss of their languages.

In this response, we argue that no, there has not been an equivalence between the academic fields of macroecology and linguistic ecology, but for good reason. Although Mufwene's repeated argument that LEL is simply an adaptive response to a changing socioeconomic ecology is reasonable on a theoretical plane, it does not get the field of linguistics very far in practice. We show that taking an ecological perspective can assist our very localized and particularized accounts of the causes of LEL in each specific context, but we argue that the strongest form of the ecological perspective is unhelpful in its dehumanization of a phenomenon that cannot (and should not) be abstracted away from people's lived experiences. While Mufwene claims that linguists seek to keep people speaking languages that may not benefit them, we argue that his search for an all-encompassing theory that could account for all instances of LEL appears to be another endeavour carried out in the service of academia rather than communities of speakers.

In our capacity as linguists at the University of the South Pacific, we take this opportunity to respond to the target article, drawing on examples from the twelve member countries of our institution and the region generally. Much of Mufwene's argument appears to be directed at an over-emphasis in the literature on indigenous populations of 'settlement colonies', particularly in North America, and we thus take the opportunity to respond from a range of very different contexts.

2. WHAT AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE BRINGS TO THE DEBATE: A FOCUS ON THE LOCAL AND THE PARTICULAR. Mufwene may be right that many discussions of LEL rely on simplistic accounts of the effects of very broad phenomena, particularly globalization and colonization. He is certainly right that these broad phenomena play out in very particular ways in each context. This is where the strengths of an ecological perspective lie, reminding us to focus on the particularities of each context rather than attempting to account for LEL as a uniform process that plays out in identical ways in different contexts. As Mufwene notes, LEL is certainly not new, and arguments that rely on broad narratives of globalization and colonization do perhaps lead us to think of LEL as a phenomenon predominantly associated with European colonization of non-European peoples. He is also of course right that 'processes of LEL have not occurred uniformly everywhere, because the dynamics within the language ecosystems of different polities are not identical' and because 'every evolution is local, subject to the specific ecological pressures that operate at a given time' (Mufwene this volume:Section 7).

In this section, we take up three points from Section 6 of the target article that Mufwene raises in opposition to what he asserts is a common belief that LEL happens in uniform ways. The first is that many languages simply have not died out as might be expected by the predictions of Krauss (1992), despite having extremely small populations. The second is that globalization has been overused as a cause in overly-simplistic accounts of LEL. The third is that insufficient attention has been paid within LEL theorizing to the different manifestations of colonization. In so doing, we essentially agree with Mufwene on the substance of these three points, but we argue that the usefulness of an ecological perspective in determining the cause of LEL in any particular context is precisely the barrier to Mufwene's desire to provide an all-encompassing theory to account for LEL in general.

2.1. VITALITY OF SMALL LANGUAGES WITHIN COMPLEX ECOLOGIES. The first benefit of taking an ecological perspective of LEL is that it allows us to recognize that languages with small numbers of speakers are not necessarily endangered, a point that has been repeatedly made by linguists in the Pacific (Crowley 1994, Sumbuk 2006, Siegel 1997, Tryon 2006), but runs counter to the predictions of Krauss (1992). Vanuatu provides rich examples, given that the largest of its estimated 138 languages is spoken by approximately 11,500 speakers, yet only the 18 languages with fewer than 15 speakers, and potentially another 13 languages with fewer than 100 speakers are generally considered certain to be lost in the very near future (François et al. 2015). As François and colleagues (2015:8) note, ‘the language ecology of traditional Vanuatu was always built around language communities that would typically have the size of one or two villages with no more than a few hundred members, and still be in their full strength’. Although they cite evidence that some languages or varieties have died out in recent decades, they assert that the vast majority are still being transmitted to the next generation today and therefore remain healthy.

As another example from the region, the island nation of Tokelau comprises three atolls that amount to only ten square kilometres, inhabited by around 1,500 people. Tokelauan is the first language of 94% of those living in the territory and is a language of instruction alongside English throughout the education system (Statistics New Zealand 2012). In contrast, a 2006 survey of the 1,000 members of the Tokelauan diaspora in Hawai’i estimated that only 8% held any conversational proficiency (Akiemi 2012). This indicates that where a single language is the vernacular of even a small nation it can remain strong, while the same language may fare completely differently in a similarly-sized community who are positioned as a minority in another context.

Mufwene explains a number of reasons that ‘smaller’ languages have been sustained, for example by geographically isolated communities that are not in economic or political competition with one another, and he argues that the assumption that small languages are weaker is ‘based on a Western view of the world with locally globalized modern economies which tend to function in one dominant language and where economic success tears down traditional ethnic barriers and spreads the language of the economic system’ (Mufwene 2016:123). But perhaps a

more important reason that some of the predictions have not come true is that they have often been extrapolated from figures from other parts of the world, rather than based on the particularities of their local contexts.

Krauss (1992), a seminal paper often cited by scholars concerned with linguistic ecology (Chen 2016, Mufwene 2003, Mühlhäusler 1996), begins with empirical data of moribund languages from the Americas, Australia and what was then the USSR. However, in order to discuss the state of LEL globally, Krauss relies on data from the SIL Ethnologue (Grimes 1988) to provide approximate numbers of known languages (using only Bible translation as a proxy for language vitality) and then uses a series of leaps in logic to assert that certain circumstances ranging from conflict to genocide to television watching are prevalent in many of the most linguistically diverse countries, and therefore predictors of certain loss of many more languages during the coming century. The Melanesian countries of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji (sustaining approximately a sixth of the world's languages between them) simply do not fit the profile that Krauss describes. Indeed, many of the conflicts that have occurred in these countries (such as the ethnic tension of 1998-2003 in the Solomon Islands and the four coups between 1987 and 2006 in Fiji) have been fought along ethnic lines, and have therefore possibly reinforced the roles of indigenous languages. Krauss makes no case for LEL in any context outside those for which he has reliable figures of moribund languages, so it is hard to understand why his predictions have been given so much credence. Of course, many small languages are under threat, but there is no single account of LEL that can integrate population size in any meaningful way, since such an account would be forced to disregard the local ecologies in which such languages are spoken.

2.2. LOCALIZED RESPONSES TO GLOBALIZATION. The second point that Mufwene raises against overly-simplistic accounts of LEL is that globalization has been overused as a cause. He asserts that language advocates such as Crystal (2000, 2004), Nettle & Romaine (2002), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), and Thomason (2015) 'have generally been content with vague explanations of the causes of language loss, such as colonization, globalization, and even McDonaldization' (Mufwene this volume:Section 1), and argues that 'the factors that roll the dice on the vitality of particular languages lie in the local interactional dynamics enabled by the relevant population

structures' (Mufwene this volume:Section 6.2). The 'melodrama' that Mufwene (2002) objects to surrounds the assertion that globalization has led to the wholesale imposition of English in contexts in which other languages formerly played the same part.

We agree with Mufwene that globalization and the global spread of English as a lingua franca are not one unitary phenomenon. Our own observations and informal surveys of students and colleagues suggest that the usage of English varies widely across, and within, countries of the Pacific region. In some countries, such as the Solomon Islands, English is prestigious and used in many high-status domains such as parliament and much of print media, but it is not the vernacular even of the elite, who speak an indigenous language or Solomons Pijin in the majority of domains. In Fiji, English serves as a lingua franca throughout a country comprised of two main ethnic groups who speak the unrelated languages of Fijian and Fiji Hindi (as well as minority groups who speak Rotuman, Chinese or other Pacific languages) but very few people speak English as their vernacular. Meanwhile, in other countries such as the Cook Islands, many inhabitants of the main island, Rarotonga, have shifted to English as the vernacular, while those on outer islands use English only as a second language in contexts such as formal education. There is certainly no uniform pattern, even though English is the (or a) medium of instruction throughout at least secondary education in all 'Anglophone' Pacific countries, and is an important regional lingua franca that plays a key role in trade, mobility and communication in the Pacific.

There are also plenty of examples in which languages with limited 'global currency' are reclaiming space, going against the trends lamented by Phillipson (1992) and other theorists of 'linguistic imperialism'. For example, despite the awareness that major languages such as English are essential for international participation and mobility, mother tongue-based or vernacular education policies are being progressively introduced across the Pacific region, in recognition of the fact that this improves educational outcomes (UNESCO 2015). Such educational reforms range from community-driven initiatives such as the Tok Ples Pri Skul movement that saw 380 of Papua New Guinea's languages used in early childhood education in the 1980s (Klaus 2003), to top-down policies such as Vanuatu's 2012 implementation of early education in the vernacular, supported by a major joint funding partnership between the Governments of Vanuatu, Australia and New Zealand (Willans 2016).

The study of the national language is compulsory throughout much or all of secondary education in countries such as the Cook Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga and Tuvalu, with a pass in this language subject a requirement for university entrance in several of these countries. The populations of some of these language communities are tiny, such as Niue with an estimated 1600 and Tokelau with an estimated 1500, so it cannot be argued that these languages are being studied in order to compete in the international arena for economic or information-sharing purposes. At tertiary level, opportunities to study Pacific languages are more limited. However, once again, there is resurgence of interest in such opportunities, which has seen the University of the South Pacific launch a new degree programme in Cook Islands Māori in 2017, and commence a proposal for a Tongan programme in 2018, while enrolments in the Fijian programme have almost trebled between 2014 and 2017. In countries in which a university degree is still far from common, students who take up these opportunities demonstrate that they do see the importance of maintaining and studying their languages, while also recognising the value of English in the current socioeconomic climate.

Meanwhile, outside the formal education system, other grassroots practices would seem to defy the assumption that languages of limited international currency are being left behind. A good example is the Turaga movement on Pentecost Island, Vanuatu, through which Chief Viraleo Boborenvanua is attempting to revive and extend traditional practices, including a new writing system based on traditional sand drawings and the coinage of lexical items that are considered to reflect indigenous concepts. In this case, the chief is not so much maintaining the linguistic system as adapting it in ways that mark the speech and writing of Turaga followers out as different from other users of the Raga language (Personal communication, Andrew Gray, April 2017).

As Mufwene also notes, it is not always the languages most immediately associated with globalization (such as English) that are responsible for LEL. Hicks (2017) provides a detailed account of the Baemawz community on Santa Cruz, Solomon Islands, who are shifting from the indigenous language of Engdewu to Pijin, the national variety of Melanesian Pidgin that serves as the lingua franca. Meanwhile, Schneider and Gray (2015) describe the complexity of language shift and loss on Pentecost, Vanuatu, in which the languages of Sowa (now extinct) and Ske (approximately 300 speakers) have been influenced by the dominant languages of Apma, Raga

and Sa (approximately 8,000 speakers, 6,500 speakers and 2,500 speakers, respectively), with the boundaries of Apma gradually shifting outwards to encompass areas that were previously Sowa or Ske dominant. In this case, it is neither a former colonial language nor a pidgin that threatens the vitality of these languages, but the neighbouring vernaculars that are considered large by Vanuatu's standards. Sumbuk (2006) provides similar examples from Papua New Guinea.

However, we do see grave effects of other aspects of globalization in mass migration of Pacific islanders, particularly from Polynesia and Micronesia, to countries such as the USA, New Zealand and Australia. Tryon (2006) gives the figure for Pacific islanders residing in these countries as 400,000. In some cases, there are more nationals living outside the home nation than inside it, with Niue providing the most extreme example (based on Tryon's 2006 figures) in which 1,800 people live on Niue while 14,000 are in New Zealand. Tryon asserts that this form of migration, along with in-country urban drift, has had the biggest impact on LEL in the region. In this sense, Mufwene is right that speakers of Pacific languages are responding to the shifting socioeconomic ecology in ways that adapt to their needs, and that such adaptive responses are entirely contingent on the particularities of the local context.

2.3. PARTICULARITIES OF THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE. Mufwene's third reason for valuing an ecological perspective is similar to the second. While it is hard to refute the relevance of colonization to LEL, again we mustn't fall back on sweeping generalizations about the direct link between these phenomena. Mufwene argues that the colonizers' languages have not been taken up by the colonized in consistent ways, resulting in different impacts on LEL. The majority of islands of the Pacific basin experienced some form of colonization (with the notable exception of Tonga), but under widely differing arrangements. Some island groups, such as Fiji, were ceded semi-voluntarily, while other colonial arrangements began either as agreements or competition between colonial powers. Examples include: the British taking the Solomon Islands in compensation for the Germans and Americans dividing Samoa between them; Vanuatu being administered jointly as the New Hebrides by Britain and France; and the Marshall Islands being controlled by Spain, Germany, Japan, and the United States, before finally gaining independence. As Mufwene reminds us, colonization did not start with the Europeans, and indeed Niue was colonized first by Samoa, then by Tonga, and then by Britain and New Zealand.

The linguistic ecologies of the colonial encounters were clearly influenced by a wide range of factors. Different powers had different approaches to ruling – notably French direct rule in contrast to British indirect rule (Miles 1998) – which had an influence on the proportion of a population exposed to the colonisers' language. The degree of linguistic diversity within a colonized territory is also relevant. The experience in the multilingual Solomon Islands, in which more than 60 indigenous languages were spoken alongside the lingua franca Pijin prior to the British colonial presence, was clearly different from Tokelau, in which only one language was spoken by the indigenous population and only one language spoken by the British colonial power.

The impact on LEL has, as Mufwene suggests, been as varied as the colonial experience. For example, the inhabitants of Banaba Island (now part of Kiribati) found themselves the owners of one of the richest stores of phosphate, the rights to which were sold to the Pacific Islands Company at the start of the 20th Century, leading to approximately 90% of the island's surface being stripped away. With the combined impact of missionary activity using the Bible in the Kiribati language, the lengthy presence of a large number of i-Kiribati labourers on Banaba, and ultimately the removal and relocation of the Banabans first to Tarawa and then to Rabi Island in Fiji, the Banaban language did not survive and most Banabans now speak Kiribati but live in Fiji (Sigrah & King 2001). In some respects, this phosphate story is similar to that of Nauru to the west, but Nauru became an independent nation and Nauruan its official language. Meanwhile, under Fiji's own colonial arrangement, the Fijians were somewhat protected from exploitation, but indentured labourers from India were brought to Fiji to work the sugarcane plantations, leading to the formation of Fiji Hindi and a greater reliance on English as a national lingua franca than has been the case in other Pacific countries.

Struggles *against* colonization have also influenced LEL. A national language can be born out of a united struggle between different groups against a common colonial cause, as was clearly the case with Bislama in what is now Vanuatu (Crowley 1990, Miles 1998:61). The elevation in status of such languages has in turn influenced the vitality of other languages, and may pose more of a threat than the actual colonial languages did. In cases where independence struggles still continue, the pre-existing national language may become closely associated with the

political movement, as is the case in Guam, where the revitalization of the Chamorro language is closely aligned to the movement for independence from the United States (Kuper 2017).

We also cannot forget that the effects of colonization are now entwined with those of globalization, and the current socioeconomic ecology of the Pacific region remains dominated by expatriate technical advisors and aid donors, whose series of short-term appointments tend to reinforce the reliance on languages like English. The global order is complex, and phenomena such as colonialism have played and continue to play out in very different ways, so Mufwene is right that superficial arguments about ‘killer languages’ (Nettle & Romaine 2000) do not capture the whole picture of LEL. However, it is not clear that his call to develop ‘a body of empirically grounded and verifiable hypotheses intended to explain why and how some languages become endangered, die, survive threats to them, or even thrive’ (Mufwene this issue, section 1) can really improve on our understanding of the way LEL takes place differently in each context.

In summary, we agree with Mufwene’s premise that sensitivities to the local particularities of a linguistic ecology are essential in understanding the way LEL works in that particular context, but we question how far this line of reasoning can take us as a field. Our goal in discussing some examples from the Pacific in such depth is to show that it is rather problematic to try and address the question of a single ecologically-embedded account of LEL without referring to these particularities. While the value of paying attention to the contexts in which LEL occurs is clear, the very strengths of such an attention to the local and the particular stand in the way of any attempt to theorize more comprehensively about processes of LEL in any useful way for linguistics as a discipline. Moreover, we argue that the pursuit of the type of theory that Mufwene seeks is problematic on two grounds that we discuss in the remaining sections: that it dehumanizes the lived experiences of LEL, and that it erects barriers between linguists and language users that take the field backwards rather than forwards.

3. THE DEHUMANIZING EFFECT OF THEORY. In his call for a more robust theory of the way language ecologies change, Mufwene argues that we must understand LEL within the broad ‘balance sheet’ of births and deaths. Theoretically, of course, he is right that languages have been emerging, diverging, waning, and dying since the dawn of humanity. We know that new varieties of languages emerge all the time, and that these varieties split off into distinct languages, such

that we recognize, for example, that there are different varieties of Cook Islands Māori (Rarotongan, Mangaian, Aitutaki and so on) that linguists and most speakers would consider to be a single language, that this language has become distinct from the closely-related languages of New Zealand Māori, Hawaiian and Rapanui, and then slightly further away from Samoan and Tuvaluan, and so on as we reconstruct the Polynesian branches of the Austronesian language family tree. In this sense, we have gained hundreds of new languages in the Pacific since the beginning of time, as seafarers travelled across the ocean and populated the islands they encountered, and as their languages gradually became distinct from others' due to natural processes of language change. Attempting to audit the world's languages at different points of history, to verify empirically the extent to which we are better or worse off than we were at some other time, would be impossible though. It would rely on making arbitrary decisions about when two varieties are sufficiently separate to be counted as distinct languages, which is by no means straightforward even now (François et al. 2015), and in any case assumes that we could reconstruct the evidence that would enable us to start counting.

However, a bigger question is why we would want to attempt this. Assessing the state of global linguistic vitality over time is only of interest as an academic project, and it is of little comfort to a community to be told that the loss of their language has been balanced out by the emergence of another one somewhere else, or to be reminded that their language was only an offshoot of an earlier branch that is still alive and well elsewhere. While Mufwene has claimed linguists have been known to exhort communities to keep speaking a language that brings them few (economic) benefits, it doesn't seem any more palatable to tell communities that their experience of loss is merely part of a larger pattern of humanity that has been unfolding through the ages.

Moreover, even if it is shown that one new language emerges, and one pre-existing language dies, presenting a zero-change situation in numerical terms, this does not mean that the lives of the speakers of those languages are unchanged. The maintenance of a community's language tends to help maintain many cultural practices that are beneficial, such as traditional techniques for withstanding cyclones, healthier diets based on locally-grown produce rather than tinned imported goods, and traditional fishing practices that ensure sustainability of stocks of fish. While these activities may not require any particular language to be spoken, it seems logical to see language shift as part of a bigger cultural shift that makes it more likely that such practices

will be lost. Perhaps these examples meet Mufwene's requirement for maintaining an ecology within which a community's language will continue to have a functional purpose (Mufwene 2001), but the unfortunate and misleading impression that this argument creates – that a choice must be made between 'traditional' and 'modern' practices – does not seem particularly adaptive overall. Again, while Mufwene's point about an ecology within which it is logical to maintain particular languages is valid on a theoretical level, it does not help us in practice.

When Mufwene turns to the question of whether language shift can be prevented, he questions whether language shift is 'necessarily maladaptive'. Once again, he is absolutely correct that language shift is adaptive in a literal sense, since people do not voluntarily choose to speak new languages that will make their lives harder or less successful. However, an adaptive response is not necessarily a positive change. In his claim, 'As much as one may regret losing part of their tradition, language shift can therefore be interpreted as an adaptive response to the changing socioeconomic ecology' (Mufwene this volume:Section 2), we again see the discord between real people's experiences and a dehumanized theoretical position. We should not underestimate the regret that communities really do feel when they realize that their language is no longer being maintained, particularly since such loss does not automatically grant the community access to the advantages of the global market place, or even a more localized cash economy.

The following statement made by the chairperson of the Niue Language Commission, at the 2017 Vagahau Niue Conference presents a clear example of this regret:

In my own time, you know, having gone to school here, I can remember having to be punished for speaking Niuean and having to write lines 'I must not speak Niuean. I must not speak Niuean' ... The problems that colonisers had left behind you know, they've taught us well to look down on our culture, to look down on our language. ... You know, at this late stage, we're trying to grip onto it and trying to think otherwise. Now we're learning that there is a lot of value in our own culture. (Stewart 2017)

A statement made by a Banaban during a panel organized for International Mother Language Day in 2017 shows a similar feeling:

We no longer have our Banaba language. We lost it. It committed suicide when the British moved our ancestors from Ocean island so they could mine phosphate. Today we speak

broken Kiribati and Fijian. It's all we have. We have the Banaba dances and chants/songs but we don't know the meaning anymore. (Inoke 2017)

A 'survival of the fittest' view of LEL glosses over and dismisses some truly awful periods of history, and it does linguists no favours to appear complicit in such accounts. Mufwene's frequent concession clauses such as 'although no one should hesitate to condemn the atrocities of enslavement, indentured servitude, and contract labor' (Mufwene this issue, section 4) and 'notwithstanding the difficult challenges of the transition periods' (ibid.) merely serve to normalize these traumatic experiences, highlighting the limitations of an ecological perspective in moving us forward.

4. COMPLEMENTARY ROLES OF THEORY AND ADVOCACY. Mufwene ends his paper with the declaration that 'language advocacy must be guided by more extensive and adequate theorizing about language vitality' (Mufwene this issue, section 7). This raises two questions:

1. How will we know when the theory is adequate and extensive enough?
2. Will further theorizing be of practical benefit to those engaged in language advocacy?

It may well be true that there was a sudden surge in calls for action from the mid-1990s (Mufwene 2003) that has not been matched by a similar increase in theoretical discussion. However, communities outside academia tend to think linguists are guilty of too much theory and not enough practical application as it is. It only seems to confirm stereotypes of ivory towerism if people (whether speakers or not, trained linguists or not) must wait until theoreticians have come up with a good theory before taking any action.

Mufwene's primary concern with advocacy appears to be that he thinks it promotes maladaptive practices. He states:

we also have the responsibility to ensure that simply "reverting language shift" (Fishman 1991) and doing no more will not ultimately make the relevant population maladaptive. ... Should Native Americans be forced to remain on their reservations in order to maintain their languages, even if this would prevent their cultural assimilation and sustain their marginalization from the dominant, non-indigenous socioeconomic world order? (Mufwene this volume:Section 3).

However, Mufwene relies on a straw man argument. Language advocacy and maintenance programs aim to make possible the option of maintaining a traditional language for those who perceive some value in it, not to impose it on an unwilling population. The local ecology is of course key, so broad brushstrokes against all forms of language activism seem counter-intuitive from the perspective that Mufwene supports.

Mufwene suggests that linguistics is embarrassing itself with inadequate theorizing about language vitality. Leaving aside the fact that linguistics cannot feel embarrassment, this is an extraordinary claim and is partly bolstered by ignoring or excluding whole subfields of the discipline. For example, it ignores the entire discourse around language revitalization and revival, which of necessity discusses vitality in specific contexts (see e.g. Amery & Gale 2008, Couzens & Eira 2014, Grenoble & Whaley 2006, Hinton & Hale 2001, Hobson et al. 2010, Simpson et al. 2008, Speas 2009, Walsh 2010, Zuckermann & Walsh 2011). Further, in claiming that the focus on ‘indigenous peoples’ has prevented the development of the big picture, Mufwene singles out the Europeans in European settlement colonies as an example of populations not adequately covered by theories of language vitality. While of course it is always possible to do more research and to theorize more, the vitality of (for example) North American English does not seem notably ‘under-theorized’, and certainly not when compared to the majority of the world’s languages which (endangered or not) remain un-theorized and un- or under-described.

Former settlement colonies, such as in North America and Australia, certainly do not mirror the experiences of any of the contexts we discuss in this paper, and the idea that concerns with LEL are based on such a narrow type of example is clearly problematic. If some scholars have indeed focused too narrowly on certain areas of the world, or certain types of language, it can be valid to draw attention to this, and Mufwene does well to keep us alert to the range of contexts that do not fit the pattern presented. It is likely that such a dominance of focus on contexts such as North America and Australia is shaped by the availability of funding and physical locations of departments with the ability to train more fieldworkers, and thus the greater number of publications and conference papers about such contexts, rather than necessarily a blind spot to diversity of experiences. Nonetheless, the strength of taking an ecological perspective is in foregrounding the importance of local context in both theoretical and practical endeavours.

5. CONCLUSIONS. In concluding, while we agree in principle with many of his points, Mufwene does not really show us a workable way forward. As Garner (2004:86) notes, a language ecology perspective ‘remains for the moment a way of thinking, of reinterpreting familiar language issues in a holistic way, and of discovering new issues that predominant approaches ignore or gloss over’, rather than a theory or a framework. Drawing close parallels to the discipline of ecology and envisioning languages as species actually serves to erase the human experience from the discussion and, since ‘environment’, in Haugen’s (1972) usage, was only ever intended to refer to the society in which languages are spoken, it is not clear that the environmental comparisons have much ‘heuristic yield’ (Eliasson 2008:51). As Eliasson points out, Haugen even apologizes for introducing the term ecology, noting that is ‘one of those catchwords that happen[...] to be fashionable today, and it is being worked to death’ (Haugen 1979:243).

While showing convincingly that LEL theorizing needs to take many factors into account, we believe that Mufwene unwittingly exposes an uncomfortable truth: language vitality is such a complicated area that a unified ecologically-grounded theory of the type Mufwene is calling for is neither possible nor desirable. In any case, we think it fair to point out that Mufwene does not himself provide any clues as to what such a theory would actually look like. There are many theoretical positions and methods that researchers on LEL can call on, and there are many more that can be imagined and will doubtless emerge. However, it does not seem especially useful to complain that the field is embarrassing itself, or to suggest that language advocacy should stop until some acceptable level of theorizing has been reached. Concern about LEL together with advocacy for language maintenance have on the whole led to positive and interesting directions for linguistics, and should only be encouraged.

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