

WAYNE HARBERT, with help from SALLY McCONNELL-GINET, AMANDA MILLER, and JOHN WHITMAN, eds. 2009. *Language and poverty*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. 225 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84769-119-4.

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How do economic factors determine the fate of minor languages? How do the languages people speak affect their well-being and access to resources? The book *Language and poverty* seeks to answer these questions by drawing out the links among economic and social marginalization, politics, and language choice, which virtually anyone who does research on minor or endangered languages will readily recognize as critical contexts for their fieldwork, scholarly writing, and linguistic conservation efforts. The book is a welcome follow-up from a conference by the same title that was held at Cornell in October 2005 as part of the university's Poverty, Inequality, and Development Initiative, which sponsored more than thirty international, cross-disciplinary events over the past decade.

In addition to a synthetic introduction by the editors and a brief conclusion, the book contains eleven substantive chapters, most of them authored by experts in linguistics, education, and language policy. Two offer perspectives that will already be familiar to readers of this journal: "The Role of the Linguist in Language Maintenance and Revitalization: Documentation, Training, and Materials Development" by Lenore A. Grenoble, Keren D. Rice, and Norvin Richards and "Preserving Digital Language Materials: Some Considerations for Community Initiatives" by Helen Aristar-Dry. Although these chapters come at the end of the book, the point made in opening by Grenoble et al. really stands as the motivation behind the whole volume: that it is increasingly irresponsible for linguists to maintain a focus solely on their own scholarly interests when working on languages that have been brought to the point of endangerment by the social marginalization of their speakers. The authors of both these chapters interpret the term "poverty" broadly, using it to refer not only to a lack of financial resources on the part of would-be speakers, but also to forms of insufficiency on the part of researchers, including lack of fieldwork funding, inadequate or outdated equipment, limits on time available to dedicate to language-related tasks, diminishing numbers of fluent speakers, and insufficient expertise to properly preserve digital language data. The take-away message of Grenoble et al.'s chapter is that responses to language endangerment are constrained by poverty in all its forms. How can linguists properly support a community's interest in developing pedagogical materials when they themselves have no special knowledge of how to produce them? How can community members properly benefit from training in linguistic analysis and documentary methods when they are too busy earning a living or lack basic literacy skills? When systematically inventoried in this way, the obstacles to successful documentation and language development programs—not to mention the long-term preservation of digital language data in an interoperative format as advocated by Aristar-Dry—can seem insurmountable. Under such circumstances, Grenoble et al. argue, taking into account the community's interests in addition to the linguist's own is the best one can do, because it maximizes the value of what ultimately gets produced, pools the resources available to dedicate to language work, and

(though the authors do not emphasize this) fosters the goodwill that sustains projects over the long time frame they require.

Three of the volume's chapters are concerned with the situation of (mainly sub-Saharan) Africa. Although coverage of some unrepresented world areas, such as Latin America, would have been nice, the emphasis on Africa certainly makes sense. Besides being a site of extreme linguistic diversity (it is the home of around thirty percent of the world's languages), the African continent is impoverished by most standard measures, rife with humanitarian crises, struggling to emerge from centuries of exploitation, and undergoing a massive population shift to urban areas. Indeed, for one group of sedentarized foragers in southern Africa, life under modern state control became so precarious that in the 1970s the phrase "we are dying of hunger" was conventionalized as a greeting (45).

The chapters by Herman M. Batibo ("Poverty as a Crucial Factor in Language Maintenance and Language Death: Case Studies from Africa") and Matthias Brenzinger ("Language Diversity and Poverty in Africa") are largely on the same wavelength, observing how the reorganization (really hierarchization) of socioeconomic life in postcolonial Africa has created pressures on minority language speakers to assimilate to larger regional or national languages and cultures. In most cases it is not the languages of former European colonizers like English or French but the high-prestige indigenous *lingua francas* like Bambara, Hausa, and Swahili that are "the most vicious language killers," gaining speakers at other languages' expense (30). The possible futures we are left to imagine are depressing. To the extent that the economic situation of Africans improves it will be within the framework of nation-states, and "[w]here members of minorities are given a chance to participate and progress in national developments, they are often confronted with the fact that modernization and upward social mobility demand from them the sacrifice of their cultural and linguistic identities" (44–45). Use of minor languages will decline because they will be seen by their speakers as a hindrance to social and economic advancement, leaving them without access to information, interfering with their ability to do business effectively, and excluding them from literacy, education, and other means through which they might better themselves. Alternatively, minority languages will survive as a coincidental byproduct of their speakers' poverty. These two scenarios are portrayed as complementary, the choice between them inevitable.

The chapter by South African scholar and political activist Neville Alexander ("The Impact of the Hegemony of English on Access to and Quality of Education with Special Reference to South Africa") is rather more inspiring in tone, approaching the problem of social and linguistic inequality in postcolonial Africa from the point of view of political economy. In the interest of understanding how Africans "have become victims of a monolingual habitus" despite the overwhelming historical prevalence of multilingualism, Alexander calls for more careful scrutiny of the history and logic behind many seemingly benevolent African language policies. In South Africa, the promotion of "neutral" ex-colonial languages has covertly perpetuated class stratification and deepened ethnic divides by "promoting a kind of economic diglossia" (58) in which African languages are valuable only when used in the informal sector. There is increasing support in South Africa for vernacular language schooling, but as Alexander argues, "no amount of policy change at the school level can guarantee [minor language] use in high-status functions" (62). Without some kind of linguistically-based affirmative action to encourage the use of vernaculars in

the wealthiest, most prestigious institutions—banking, broadcasting, public service, and so on—Alexander fears that minority language speakers in Africa will continue to be structurally disadvantaged by the hegemony of English. Supportive measures of the kind Alexander proposes are now being implemented in South Africa. The South African Broadcasting Corporation broadcasts in all eleven of the country's official languages. Interfaces for mobile phones were recently made available in a range of South African languages, and Microsoft is working to localize its software there. One of South Africa's leading banks recently equipped its automatic teller machines with screen interfaces in isiZulu and Sesotho. Nearly thirty percent of their customers now use them.

Whether the immediate concern is educational attainment, democratic participation, or the maintenance of heritage languages, the effects of linguistic inequality seem to be overdetermined by the relentless imposition of hierarchy within the nation-state. This topic is addressed more or less explicitly by several contributors to the volume. Ajit K. Mohanty ("Perpetuating Inequality: Language Disadvantage and Capability Deprivation of Tribal Mother Tongue Speakers in India") shows in detail how members of India's hundreds of nonstandard-speaking lower castes and linguistically isolated "Scheduled Tribes" are denied educational opportunities by the privileging of barely two dozen official languages. Members of Scheduled Tribes have lower literacy levels, higher drop-out rates, lower performance scores, and lower enrollment in vocational school and post-secondary education than the overall population. The discouragement of tribal parents and children through neglect of their languages triggers a "vicious cycle" of failure that leads to capability deprivation<sup>1</sup> and impoverishment. Echoing Alexander's suspicion of ex-colonial languages, Mohanty calls English a "lollipop" that functions to preserve an unjust status quo: those who are in a position to rethink its superior status are silenced by the sweet privilege it permits them to enjoy. The anglicization of India's elites, combined with the same kind of exclusion of nondominant languages from public life that Neville describes for South Africa, helps stabilize a national system of unequal multilingualism that is accepted as legitimate even by those it works to disenfranchise.

There are few places in the world where the hegemony of English holds more firmly than in the United States. In his chapter, "Econolinguistics in the USA," John Baugh proposes for the U.S. a three-tiered hierarchy of codes that places native standard English speakers at the top, non-native speakers at the bottom, and speakers of non-standard dialects somewhere in between. The chapter by Ofelia García and Leah Mason, "Where in the World is U.S. Spanish? Creating a Space of Opportunity for U.S. Latinos," discusses some of the factors that prevent U.S. Spanish-speakers from mobilizing their bilingualism as a resource given such a hierarchy. In the U.S., Spanish is associated with conquered and colonized people (i.e., Mexicans and Puerto Ricans). It is devalued as the language of immigrants (nearly half the U.S. Latino population is foreign-born), and feared as the language of a threateningly large and growing subpopulation (there were 25 million Spanish-speaking Latinos in the U.S. at the time of the 2000 census). It is commonly assumed that U.S. Latinos are poor because they speak Spanish, preventing their attainment of fluency in

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<sup>1</sup> "Capability" is economist Amartya Sen's effort to operationalize the idea that freedom of choice is itself a factor in human welfare; see, e.g., Sen 1999.

English and blocking their entry into the labor market. (This is precisely Mohanty's argument for the situation in India.) But the construction of Spanish as a problem for Latinos to overcome, rather than a resource they are able to exploit, erases the value of their bilingualism in the very social space where it has the most economic potential.<sup>2</sup> As the authors point out, the buying power of the U.S. Latino population is several times that of the rest of the Spanish-speaking world combined. Eighty-nine percent of U.S. Latinos are bilingual. But the U.S. census asks Latinos only about their proficiency in English, never how well they speak Spanish. Bilingual education is always meant to be transitional, when it is implemented at all. Even the *word* "bilingual" has literally been struck from the discourse of U.S. language policy (Crawford 2004).<sup>3</sup> It is only when Spanish is constructed as "heritage"—that is, as something old and inert—that it can be safely associated with Latinos and inserted into the U.S. language hierarchy alongside other foreign languages.<sup>4</sup>

François Vaillancourt's chapter "Language and Poverty: Measurement, Determinants, and Policy Responses" represents an economist's perspective on the volume's twin themes. In order to translate notions like "language" and "poverty" into terms that can be manipulated using formal economic models, standard ways of measuring them have to be devised. For poverty the author focuses on the kinds of monetary measures with which economists are most familiar, such as the dollar amount required per person or household in order to meet basic needs, or a percentage amount relative to a national average labor income. Language can be modeled after currency as a medium of exchange, or as an ethnic attribute on analogy with race, or as a form of human capital that can be quantified by calculating the monetary returns it brings to its speakers. So an economist might ask, what is the marginal contribution of the language people speak to the probability of their being poor? To what extent does it account for the severity or depth of their poverty? Vaillancourt illustrates this approach using his own data on the effects of language skills on labor income in Quebec. Positive returns accrue to most speakers for their bilingualism, though bilingualism in French does not appear to affect the labor income of Anglophone men (no explanation is offered for this interesting result; might it have to do with the linguistic capital of English-speaking men already being at or near the ceiling?). Unsurprisingly, the average income of "allophones," Quebec residents whose mother tongue is neither English nor French (the category is mostly comprised of immigrants), is negatively affected by their lack of skill in these languages. Having established through multivariate analysis that poverty does have

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<sup>2</sup> For the conceptualization of language as a resource and its place in the discourse of language planning, see Ruíz 1984. For a thoughtful critique of its application in the promotion of heritage languages, see Ricento 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The term "bilingual" has been methodically erased in the No Child Left Behind era. For example, the "Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs" has been renamed the "Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for LEP [Limited English Proficient] Students."

<sup>4</sup> See Tse 2001:54-58 on the schizophrenia of U.S. language policy, which allows immigrant languages to languish while resources are poured into foreign language teaching.

linguistic determinants—not exactly an unanticipated result—the next question is what policy responses are called for. Here are Vaillancourt’s main suggestions: If poverty is due to linguistic discrimination, then the government might establish quotas or mandate use of the language in public. (Were discrimination only so easy to counteract!) If poverty is the result of undereducation for a minority language group à la Mohanty, then mother-tongue schooling may help, but only in the long run, as “it will take probably 40 years for the educated workers to replace the undereducated ones” (158). If the poor speakers live in a region that is economically unproductive because of remote location, dearth of natural resources, etc., new markets can be developed if the political will exists and financial backing can be found; alternatively, speakers can be encouraged to move, with predictable consequences for their already “low-return” languages. And so we arrive where we started: with people being pressed to give up their language and way of life in order to stop being poor.

It is precisely economic approaches such as Vaillancourt’s, with their “reductionist notions of productivity, output, and yield” (137) that Suzanne Romaine is writing against in her chapter, “Biodiversity, Linguistic Diversity, and Poverty: Some Global Patterns and Missing Links.” Romaine reminds us that the discursive terms used to frame a problem are influential in shaping the way we think about solving it. Just as bilingualism tends not to be seen as a potential resource where linguistic uniformity is assumed to be natural and normal, identifying poverty with low per capita income or low GDP makes it hard to think of development as anything other than getting poor people involved more intensively in the cash economy. Western money experts like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are always looking for ways to give poor people opportunities to sell their labor, “unlock” their natural resources, and buy things they formerly made themselves or did not need. But because they do not easily translate into monetary terms, the costs of development so narrowly conceived—including the degradation of environmental and cultural diversity many development projects cause—are too often left out of the equation. Romaine focuses her critique on the poverty reduction component of the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations in 2000. The brainchild of development economics guru Jeffrey Sachs, the Millennium poverty reduction measures are intended to stimulate the growth of free-market economies by offering increased aid and debt relief to poor countries in exchange for participation in trade. But as Romaine points out (see also Nettle and Romaine 2000), economic growth guided by a western logic of efficiency is unsustainable and environmentally destructive. Channeling arguments made by globalization critic Vandana Shiva (coiner of the brilliant phrase “monocultures of the mind”; see Shiva 1993), Romaine illustrates development’s darker side with a discussion of India’s so-called Green Revolution. Western efforts to improve on traditional farming practices by replacing mixed local crops with chemically fertilized high-yield monocultures has caused soil deterioration and contaminated the water supply. It has also undermined local economies of scale, forcing small farmers and rural laborers into the cities in search of work. Where people’s traditional lifeways and relationships to their lands have been so disrupted, “large-scale transformations of the environment have occurred, accompanied by cultural and linguistic decimation” (135). The fact that poverty is greatest where diversity of all kinds is highest means that interventions narrowly focused on economic growth are a threat to environments, languages, and cultures in precisely those areas of the world that are most in need

of careful conservation. Romaine urges us not to blindly accept the standard criteria for development offered by economics, because they neglect the human aspects of well-being.<sup>5</sup>

The chapter by anthropologist Peter Whiteley, “Losing the Names: Native Languages, Identity, and the State,” presents the Hopi as an exception that proves the rule that loss of cultural diversity correlates with alienation from the local environment. Although they too are beginning to experience shift, the Hopi are unusual among Native American groups in the degree to which their language and culture have persisted despite more than a century of state-sponsored attempts to reform them. Whiteley attributes the survival of traditional Hopi lifeways to the people’s rejection of “Pahaana” or white understandings of what constitutes moral behavior (including assumptions about writing as an appropriate medium for cultural transmission—a topic addressed again below), and to the Hopi’s continued occupation of their traditional lands. Like members of other Native American groups, Hopi people tend to be quite poor; indeed, many live below the poverty line. Reservation residents continue to participate in domestic exchange networks, which provide them with a means of support where other economic opportunities are few. But participating in non-market based transactions also realizes and reaffirms Hopi people’s moral worth in their own cultural terms. Being Hopi means, first and foremost, growing and exchanging food crops, especially corn. To distribute non-Hopi commodity corn at gatherings is something of an embarrassment even today; similarly, a Hopi woman earning a living through wage labor is still considered poor if she has no one to grow corn for her. Agricultural production is at once material, social, and spiritual for the Hopi; to treat it as merely economic is to denigrate it in Hopi eyes, for it forms a key component of the “reciprocal belonging and communality that is associated, especially in ritual discourse, with health and happiness” in their culture (172). Nor can Hopi linguistic practices be disembedded from the community’s spiritual well-being and relation to the lived environment. Whiteley offers as an example Hopi names, particularly personal names. Bestowed by paternal kinswomen upon a birth or ritual initiation, personal names constitute “a genuine literary genre” (171), the poetic force of which derives from shared knowledge of the composer’s intended references. These include not only social categorizations such as the name giver’s clan affiliation, but also aesthetic qualities that depend on experiences of the natural world for their apperception. So, for example, the name Puhunömsi “freshly covered [woman]” conferred by a member of the Rabbit clan evokes the beauty of a young rabbit’s new fur. But as the experiential basis for such names becomes lost, so does the entire system of naming as a living cultural practice. Hopi people today may have access to a database of names com-

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<sup>5</sup> For a positive model, Romaine might have offered the remarkable policy that has been in place in Bhutan since the 1970s. Grounded in Buddhist ideals, Bhutan’s approach to development maximizes not GDP but GNH—“Gross National Happiness”—interpreting quality of life in a subjective, holistic way and constructing material and spiritual development as mutually reinforcing rather than in conflict. The four pillars of GNH are the promotion of sustainable development, the preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and the establishment of good governance. The strategy is apparently successful; Bhutan ranks very high on measures of subjective well-being despite the country’s low GDP. See <[www.grossnationalhappiness.com](http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com)>. I am indebted to Karma Tshering for helpful discussion of Bhutan’s development policy.



piled in the 1930s, but it is of only limited value because the cultural and environmental references behind the imagery of the old names are rarely recoverable.<sup>6</sup>

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So what, in the end, does this book teach us about the relationship between language and poverty? Unfortunately, the answer is not really clear, leading me to wonder whether the issues have perhaps been posed in a less-than-helpful way. Certainly, some patterns are glaringly evident, such as the tension between economic progress and linguistic vitality, or the pressure upon minority speakers to adopt an official language. But the presence of these forces is already well documented; the challenge for us now is to see *into* them, to understand what kinds of concrete sociolinguistic processes are being played out in the production of such robust societal-level generalizations.

What does seem clear is that we are never going to get the analytical traction needed to meet this challenge if we do not ourselves step outside the ideological space that couples languages so easily with the national order, taking for granted a specific set of assumptions about the nature of language. Throughout the volume, the image repeatedly arises of an imposing nation-state: linguistically consequential educational policies emanate from it; those who fail to speak state-sponsored codes are marginalized within its borders. But there is a limit to the explanatory power of state influence upon languages conceived as static wholes—sets of norms bundled into discrete codes, put to use in instrumental functions and opposed to one another within a unified structure, so that the further one gets from the linguistic center, the lower one slides down the scale of value (Silverstein 1996, 2003; see also Blommaert 2001, 2009). In the Western societies that are responsible for carving up the world into nation-states, not only is the relative positioning of such linguistic objects enforced by institutions like schooling and policy that serve state interests, but a shared belief that they form part of the natural order of things is one of the very cultural sleights-of-hand that brings the nation-state into being (Handler 1988). In fact, of course, languages so conceived are cultural constructions, and their alignment with political entities is no more natural or necessary than is their one-to-one alignment with individuals in the monolingual speaker-hearer. The only place in *Language and poverty* where we see this dominant linguistic ideology being resisted is in Peter Whiteley's chapter (175-76), where older members of the Hopi community are depicted as refusing to submit to one of the ideology's most powerful edifying institutions, literacy, in order to avoid being swept up by it.

The editors distance their project from a volume by the same name published forty years ago (Williams 1970), which attempted to assess the impact of poverty on the classroom performance of American children. In one sense, this is understandable: few linguists today would be inclined to explore the "linguistic deficits" of "poverty children." But to the extent that a number of the contributions to that volume took socially situated linguistic

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<sup>6</sup> Whiteley's description of Hopi names makes for an interesting contrast with the situation described by Moore 1988 for Chinookan. The cultural value of Chinookan names derives not from their content (their meanings that have now unfortunately been lost), but from the belief that their archaic meanings and structures have been obscured by the passage of time and are now hidden inside them.

practices, i.e., speech, as their target for analysis, and did not limit their object of interest to static and abstract languages (e.g., William Labov's "The Logic of Nonstandard English" is reprinted in it), I cannot help but feel that the earlier volume better positioned itself to uncover something new. When we approach language as fundamentally a social activity, we can begin to see the complexity of the associations that hold between language and identity; we can begin to see the "construction of cultural meanings which may lie far afiel from the political economic bases of the distribution of linguistic resources" (Heller 2007:13). But "once debate is focused on linguistic issues ... conceptualized in terms of The Standard," anyone who gets involved in the debate necessarily contributes to "its hegemonic domination over the field of controversy, no matter what position is taken with respect to it" (Silverstein 1996:284). Herman Batibo unwittingly illustrates this problem when he describes the situation of Naro, a small Khoesan language of Botswana that was endangered relative to its neighbors (31–33). As a result of a series of mission- and NGO-sponsored projects empowering Naro speakers through literacy, community self-governance, and economic development, the vitality of Naro improved greatly. Indeed, it improved to such an extent that speakers of the region's other minority languages began shifting their allegiance to it! In short, once we accept the notion of discrete, functionally complete languages—more or less official, more or less vital—as the basic units of the linguistic-political order, we can shuffle them around to alter who has the advantage, but we can never level the playing field. Coming at the problem from the other direction, the strength of this ideology provides some explanation for creolist Lawrence Carrington's observation that vernacular literacy campaigns are most likely to be successful when they form part of a major societal transformation. Carrington admits that fomenting revolution is probably beyond the scope of what linguists ought to be doing. But when it comes to facilitating the kind of social equalization brought about by universal vernacular literacy, disaggregating the linguistic field by disassembling the state seems to be "a good starting point" (1997:89).

Recognizing that language endangerment has its roots in social inequality, linguists have tried to draw attention to the positive value of diversity, advocating stable multilingualism as a way out of the bind between subordination and assimilation that paves the way to language shift. The idea is appealing, but is it realistic? Our academic visions of linguistic justice stand little chance of gaining acceptance by those actually making the ongoing choices if they do not articulate with the models of difference they themselves hold. Being "a speaker of X" is more than a utilitarian condition, a matter of improving or diminishing one's access to resources. It is also a state of mind, reflecting a person's understanding of his or her placement in the social world. Such understandings—"attitudes" as we often call them—cannot be reduced to "the simple perception that it is to one's own economic advantage or that of one's children to learn and use the regional language" (9)<sup>7</sup>; after all, language shift is totally underdetermined by the addition of a code to one's repertoire. As the approach taken in the present volume demonstrates, this is not an area where we are going to make much headway by searching for top-down sociological generalizations. We already know what the objective forces are; if we want to know what makes them so compelling

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<sup>7</sup> From the Introduction, written by Harbert et al.



we have to know how people *feel* them. Why would a group of people construct themselves discursively as a community “dying of hunger”? What makes it “unHopi” to earn money from beans and corn? Only when we appreciate how linguistic and cultural difference is experienced and construed by those who are oppressed by it do we stand any chance of engaging effectively with impoverished, linguistically marginalized people at the level of their concrete linguistic actions, the bits that ultimately comprise their dying “languages.”

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