

PERSPECTIVES

On how and why languages become endangered: Reply to Mufwene

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Salikoko Mufwene raises significant questions about how and why languages become endangered (and die). The purpose of this reply is to provide additional perspective on what goes into answering these questions. Several of Mufwene’s claims are responded to. Questions are raised concerning what the theorizing about language endangerment and loss (LEL) that Mufwene calls for would be like. Many causal factors associated with LEL are mentioned, advances in understanding are pointed out, and the roles of language documentation and language revitalization are clarified.*

Keywords: Salikoko Mufwene, language endangerment, causes of language loss, language documentation, language revitalization, *Catalogue of Endangered Languages* (ELCat)

1. INTRODUCTION. Salikoko Mufwene (2017) raises significant questions about how and why languages become endangered (and die). The purpose of this reply is to provide additional perspective on what goes into answering these questions, responding to some claims in Mufwene’s article.

Mufwene’s title, ‘Language vitality: The weak theoretical underpinnings of what can be an exciting research area’, suggests that something is wrong, though Mufwene offers no substantive proposals to address what he sees as the problem and mentions only a few of the factors that can contribute to language loss. Rather, he calls for ‘theorizing about language vitality more adequately than has been the case to date’ (p. e204). A footnote explains that he uses ‘*theorize* in the meaning of developing 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’ (p. e202). He thinks ‘that linguistics should save itself some embarrassment by theorizing about language vitality’ (p. e204). His theorizing ‘call[s] for a comparative approach’ (p. e220). In his words: ‘more breadth in dealing with LEL [language endangerment and loss] will enrich our theorizing about the subject matter’ (p. e209), and ‘what linguistics has missed by not adopting the kind of broader comparative approach advocated here is the challenge of tough questions about what is different and what is similar across the range of these situations that have led to language shift’ (p. e211). However, Mufwene makes no such broad comparisons himself and at the same time leaves unmentioned much in the literature that does contribute understanding to these issues. Others have a different, more positive view of the state of affairs. As shown below, much more is known about the factors that cause languages to become endangered than Mufwene’s article suggests.

2. THEORIZING, BUT ABOUT WHAT? As Swadesh (1948:235) pointed out long ago, and as can be seen from the list of causal factors given below, ‘the factors determining the obsolescence of languages are non-linguistic’. That the causes of language endangerment and language death are not linguistic raises the question: To what extent can linguists ‘theorize’ successfully about language loss? In a broad comparative perspective, we already know that the nonlinguistic factors listed below can influence speakers toward replacing one language with another, and that circumstances can vary greatly

* I thank Kenneth Rehg and two other commentators who prefer to remain anonymous for helpful comments on this paper (absolving them of any guilt for what I have written).

from case to case and can interact with one another to yield complicated results, making prediction (a requirement of some approaches to explanation) impossible and generalizing difficult in the extreme. The sort of theorizing Mufwene calls for would take us way beyond linguistics into the vicissitudes of human choice, whims of society, and presumably into the contentious approaches to the explanation of social change, with all of its random and unique factors along with some putative systematic ones.

Swadesh had already identified several factors that contribute to language replacement in 1948, saying, ‘the process does not move uniformly but usually first affects certain sections of the people—defined in terms of geographical location, age-group, sex, economic and cultural status—and certain types of personality’ (1948:234). Swadesh also recognized the difficulty of getting a general understanding of what can lead to language loss, calling for research with individuals: ‘Field workers are therefore urged to collect autobiographies and individual case studies from people whose lives are particularly revealing as to the sociology of language conflict’ (p. 234). At the same time, Swadesh’s article was itself comparative in the sense Mufwene calls for, discussing nine cases in some detail, and Swadesh made essentially the same plea for comparative perspective: speaking of ‘generalizations about the sociology of obsolescent languages’, he ‘enter[s] a plea to field workers to seek and report data that may some day make possible a serious general study’ (p. 235).

Of course, insight from comparative investigation is valuable for understanding language vitality and the factors that affect it. However, such comparative study has not been as neglected as Mufwene believes; much is already known from the literature and resources that do make comparisons, and in any case it will not be easy to generalize further even from comparing more cases, given how varied the nonlinguistic causes of language shift and language loss are.

It is relevant to mention approaches to assessing language vitality and the factors involved in language endangerment that these approaches address. There are several. One is EGIDS (the EXPANDED GRADED INTERGENERATIONAL DISRUPTION SCALE), used by *Ethnologue*;¹ it has ten vitality levels. I rely on the *Catalogue of Endangered Languages*’ LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT INDEX (LEI; see Lee & Van Way 2016). Its criteria for defining an endangered language and for determining its level of endangerment embody a number of factors, criteria that are applicable across language endangerment situations.

- The absolute number of speakers: the fewer the number of speakers, the less likely the language’s long-term survival.²
- Intergenerational transmission: If a language is not being learned by children in the traditional way, passed on from one generation to the next, it is essentially doomed to extinction unless revitalization efforts prove successful. The greater the intergenerational transmission, the more likely the language’s survival.
- Decreasing number of speakers
- Decrease in domains of use: The more the contexts in which the language is used are reduced, the greater its endangerment becomes.

¹ See <https://www.ethnologue.com/about/language-status>.

² There are, of course, relatively stable languages that have a very small number of speakers, such as the languages of several tribes in South America. However, when they are surrounded by powerful languages (such as Portuguese, for example), which are known to have frequently tipped other similar languages to shift rapidly from stable to endangered and then to become extinct, these languages are considered endangered, even if they currently seem stable.

Based on these criteria, the LEI gives a score for the degree of endangerment for each of the 3,406 endangered languages in the *Catalogue of Endangered Languages* (ELCat; <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com>), together with information of various sorts on these languages. This constitutes a valuable comparative resource in its own right and a solid foundation from which to launch the sort of comparison Mufwene calls for. Indeed, comparative investigation of this sort has already been done and has resulted in new knowledge that contributes to the field (see, for example, Campbell & Okura 2018).

It is from comparison of the data in ELCat, for example, that we have been able to demonstrate concretely that the magnitude of language extinction is much greater now than ever before, strikingly accelerated in recent times, and we have determined more accurately what that rate is. Comparative evidence from ELCat has allowed us to correct some major erroneous claims about language endangerment. The frequently repeated claim that one language becomes extinct every two weeks is not supported. ELCat finds that on average about one language every three months becomes extinct, or 4.3 languages per year.

This corrected rate of extinction may not be as shocking as the claim that a language dies every two weeks, but there are still striking grounds for alarm—for example, the list of recently extinct languages is sufficiently shocking for anyone, as is the list of languages with fewer than ten speakers, probably all of which will soon be extinct (if revitalization efforts do not succeed). These, among other things, confirm the ongoing crisis of accelerated language loss.³

We might also ask, theorizing for whom? (See discussion below about involvement of communities and revitalization efforts.)

3. CAUSES OF LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT. Mufwene believes language endangerment scholars have done a poor job of explaining causes of language endangerment. He says language advocates ‘have generally been content with vague explanations of the causes of language loss, such as colonization, globalization, and even McDonaldization’ (p. e204). However, his discussion mentions only a few causal factors, with little detail, and does not put them in the broader comparative context that he calls for. Thus, in his §6 ‘Causes of language loss’, the only factors he discusses are small population size, globalization, colonization, and language shift, saying of the last of these that it ‘is really about how it happens, but not why it does’ (p. e218). But much more is known about the causes of language loss than is represented in Mufwene’s discussion. Some of these causes are listed here. Each has a literature of its own that could be cited. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and more than one may obtain in a given case. They are grouped here into broad categories of factors influencing language shift and loss.

- (1) ECONOMIC FACTORS, often considered the most important: lack of economic opportunity, rapid economic transformation, ongoing industrialization, shifts in work patterns, migration and migrant labor, resource depletion, forced changes in subsistence patterns, communication with outside regions, resettlement, destruction of habitat, globalization, and so forth.
- (2) POLITICAL, GEOGRAPHICAL, DEMOGRAPHIC, AND SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS: discrimination, repression, ethnic cleansing, official language policies, level of education available, population dispersal, rapid population collapse, mar-

³ Surprisingly, Mufwene does not cite any of the standard resources for data on endangered languages: ELCat (<http://www.endangeredlanguages.com>), *Ethnologue* (<http://www.ethnologue.com>), or UNESCO’s *Atlas of the world’s languages in danger* (<http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>).

riage patterns, birth rates, access to education, refugee status, ethnic identity, the role of language in religion, religious proselytizing, military service, lack of linguistic and other human rights, number and concentration of speakers, extent and distribution of the language, low socioeconomic status of speakers, lack of revitalization or revival efforts, lack of standardization, degree of acculturation, lack of social cohesion among speakers, lack of physical proximity among speakers, war, slavery, famine, epidemics, natural disasters, and so forth.

- a. **LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT:** absence of institutional support may lead to speakers shifting away from minority languages. Institutional support is represented in the roles of the languages in education, government, churches, the media, recreational activities (sports events, popular culture, music, etc.), military service, the judicial system, and so forth. Other causal factors include lack of official recognition of the language, lack of or very limited degree of autonomy and self-determination, and so forth.
 - b. **LANGUAGE USE AND LANGUAGE CHOICE:** influences from language contact, code-switching, different kinds of multilingualism, language instruction, lack of recognition of linguistic (and other human) rights, the nature of language transmission in the community, limited literacy in the minority language, restricted degree of competence in the minority language, and so forth.
- (3) **SUBJECTIVE ATTITUDES (motivations):** attitudes of the speakers toward the languages under threat and toward the official national language(s) and dominant languages that surround them; attitudes of members of mainstream society toward minorities and their languages; the symbolic value of the dominant language (e.g. as a symbol of nation, civilization, progress, the future, affluence, upward mobility, etc.) vs. the symbolic value of the endangered language (e.g. as a symbol of the past, poverty, lack of opportunity, backwardness, etc.); the relative prestige of the language (as a cultural symbol, symbolically connected with notions of being international and urban vs. local and rural); the stigmatization of a local language (low prestige of the endangered language); language loyalty; the minority language as a marker of ethnic identity and group membership; and so forth.

4. OTHER CAUSAL FACTORS. Mufwene mentioned a few other factors, upon which he looks askance, ones that he believes language endangerment scholars have been fond of. One of these is 'pride'. He says, 'explanations such as that Native Americans gave up their languages because they lost pride in them are literally condescending' (p. e211), claiming that 'within the proposed broader comparative approach, prestige and pride would probably not have been proposed as part of the explanation for LEL among Native Americans' (p. e213). However, 'attitude' (actually a bundle of factors; see above) is considered by many to be the most deterministic factor in language loss. Groups have been known to maintain their minority language in the face of overwhelming odds because of their pride in and strong, positive attitude about their language, while others have given up their language seemingly with little provocation other than lack of a positive attitude toward that language. Surely attitude (with pride, prestige, shame, and other aspects of attitude about languages) must be a necessary component of the 'broader comparative approach' to the range of situations that lead to language shift that Mufwene is calling for.

Mufwene also does not like what he perceives as an overemphasis on the word ‘indigenous’ and on Native Americans, saying, ‘issues also arise from the framing of LEL as deleterious almost exclusively to “indigenous peoples”’ (p. e203). He contends that ‘this approach has prevented linguists from developing a big and diverse picture of language vitality around the world, including among nonindigenous populations, such as in European settlement colonies’ (p. e203). He objects to ‘the absolute use of the adjective *indigenous*, in the phrases *indigenous languages* and *indigenous peoples*, as if the adjective were synonymous with *non-European*’ (p. e211). And, ‘our theorizing about LEL will not benefit much from a discourse that is informed almost exclusively by the European settlement colonization of the Americas and Australia during the last half-millennium’ (p. e212). He asserts that ‘the mechanisms that account for language shift in the Western world can hardly be extrapolated outside the West’ (p. e215).

True, much has been written that involves indigenous peoples and languages and Native Americans (and speakers of Australian languages); however, not everyone will recognize Mufwene’s depiction. The picture one gets from the literature on how and why languages become endangered is a diverse one, involving also numerous non-American (and non-Australian) languages and nonindigenous languages—far from being ‘informed almost exclusively by the European settlement colonization of the Americas and Australia’ (p. e212). ELCat reports endangered languages in nearly every country of the world, with very few exceptions. Non-American (non-Australian) Basque, Hebrew, Irish, Māori, Welsh, and Saami (several languages) figure prominently in publications about endangered languages; and discussions of Breton, Frisian, Jejeuo, Livonian, Provençal, Ryukyuan languages, Scottish Gaelic, Võro-Seto, and others are far from absent. Languages are being replaced in various parts of the world also by non-European languages, for example, by Arabic, Indonesian (and Malay), Mandarin, Quechua, Swahili, Tukanu, Yakut, and so forth. Much has been written about these. Incidentally, it may be worthwhile also to point out explicitly, as some of these last mentioned languages illustrate, that indigenous languages can and do replace other indigenous languages. (See Thomason 2015 for discussion of numerous examples.)

In this article (and in other works) Mufwene wants to contrast the vitality that many languages in Africa show in the face of colonial languages with the language loss seen elsewhere, especially in the Americas and Australia. This is important and should definitely not go unnoticed. However, drawing this to our attention in no way warrants what is missing from and misrepresented in Mufwene’s characterization of language endangerment in the rest of the world.

Mufwene speaks broadly about ‘ecological factors’, presumably of central importance in the comparative approach to understanding the causes of language endangerment that he advocates. He also mentions ‘the power of the socioeconomic assimilation process’ (p. e213) in the US among such factors. He says that ‘additional concerns include the omission of the ecological factors that have favored not only the languages that have thrived but also those that have survived the threat of the expanding languages’ (p. e203), mentioning as examples Basque, Pennsylvania Dutch (i.e. Pennsylvania German), Gullah, ‘and numerous small languages in sub-Saharan Africa’ that ‘have survived their coexistence with other larger indigenous languages and with European languages’ (p. e203). As just mentioned, cases such as these and the factors that influence their survival or threats against them have not been ignored; some have received significant amounts of attention. Pennsylvania German and Gullah (and some sub-Saharan African languages) are not good examples for calling attention to surviving, thriving languages, as they are losing speakers and are endangered. And in effect,

all of the 3,153 endangered languages listed in ELCat, not counting the dormant and awakening ones, are cases of languages ‘that have survived the threat of the expanding languages’ (p. e203)—at least they have survived until now.

It should be noted that adequate documentation of a language also provides meta-data: information on the sociocultural, geographical, demographic, and political context of the language, that is, the sort of language ecology information Mufwene calls for; this sort of metadata is seldom neglected in modern language documentation projects. Even narrow interpretations of language documentation, such as those that follow Himmelmann (1998, 2006), advocate for abundant metadata, valuable to the discussion of ecological factors Mufwene calls for. The language endangerment literature has not omitted such ‘ecological factors’, though nearly all will agree with Mufwene on their importance. It must also be recognized, however, that these primarily nonlinguistic factors involve the random and idiosyncratic properties mentioned earlier that make generalizing about social change, including language shift, so difficult.

5. LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION AND REVITALIZATION. Mufwene says he does not focus on language documentation or language revitalization, but he does say things about each that relate to the focus on vitality, and some of what he says about them calls for clarification.

5.1. LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION. In Mufwene’s view, ‘language documentation is about adequate data collection techniques in general, from which linguistics has a great deal to gain. Recent interest has prompted field researchers to improve their data collection techniques and to adapt them to specific situations’ (p. e202). Many will strongly object to this characterization of language documentation. There is a range of opinions (and disagreements) about what language documentation is. This one offered by Mufwene reflects Himmelmann’s (1998, 2006) earlier definition. Himmelmann contrasted language description and language documentation, saying that language documentation ‘aims at the record of the linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community’ (1998:166), and that ‘language documentation may be characterized as radically expanded text collection’ (1998:165). Himmelmann’s (2006:1) definition is: ‘a language documentation is a lasting, multipurpose record of a language’, adding that it ‘is primarily concerned with the compilation and preservation of linguistic primary data and interfaces between primary data and various types of analyses based on these data’. For other related views, see Woodbury 2011:159, the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project website,⁴ and others. Given this definition, it is hardly surprising that many, according to Himmelmann (2012:187) himself, have thought this approach means that:

Documentary linguistics is all about technology and (digital) archiving.

Documentary linguistics is just concerned with (mindlessly) collecting heaps of data without any concern for analysis and structure.

Documentary linguistics is actually opposed to analysis.

In contrast, many others follow the Boasian view that language documentation includes language description and analysis, with a grammar and a dictionary, as well as texts. As Rehg (2007:15) puts it, language documentation ‘involves the development of high-quality grammatical materials and an extensive lexicon based on a full range of textual genres and registers, as well as audio and video recordings, all of which are fully

⁴ <http://www.hrelp.org/documentation/>, accessed October 18, 2015.

annotated, of archival quality, and publicly accessible'. For an expanded discussion of what adequate language documentation is, see Rhodes et al. 2007:3.

Clearly opinions differ, but as Himmelmann (2012) explains in his revised view, there is also agreement, but with differences of emphasis. Some scholars place greater emphasis on a large number of recordings representing many genres and on the technology for recording and archiving, while others give more attention to description, to analysis that includes a grammar and dictionary. I subscribe to and strongly advocate the view that adequate language documentation aims at a transparent record of a language, where that record includes language analysis and the production of a grammar and a dictionary, along with the rich corpus of recordings. In any event, few today hold to the restricted view of what language documentation is and does that Mufwene presents here.

5.2. LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION. Mufwene's concluding sentence contains the assertion that 'language advocacy must be guided by more extensive and adequate theorizing about language vitality' (p. e220). He believes that scholars have focused on language revitalization to the detriment of broader understanding of language vitality, saying that linguistics 'has dwelled more on the moral obligation that linguists owe to communities affected by LEL than on explaining what we should know about the phenomenon' (p. e204). He adds further: 'it is intriguing that language activists have been more interested in correcting evolution than in seeking to understand it from a historical and comparative perspective' (p. e208), and 'having a historically informed perspective would help us think of the proper ways to correct some current evolutionary trajectories' (p. e208). Here by 'correcting evolution' he means attempting to reverse ongoing language shift so that a language does not become more endangered or ultimately die.

The relationship between language revitalization and language documentation, and between both of these and assessing language endangerment, is often misunderstood. Language revitalization and language documentation are not in opposition but are interrelated, and revitalization efforts can contribute to language documentation, as obviously language documentation can serve the interests of language revitalization. Too often the two are seen as opposed, even antagonistic, to one another. Some believe language documentation serves only the interests of academics and neglects the language communities who want to revitalize their languages. In reality, modern language documentation projects almost never lack a language revitalization component. Though questioned by Mufwene (see above), most scholars involved in language documentation make a moral commitment to ensuring that their documentation efforts also serve the community whose language is involved, and some granting agencies insist on evidence that this is indeed the case.

Unlike extinct biological species, even a 'dead' language can continue to exist after the last speaker is gone, but for this, documentation is crucial—an undocumented extinct language is irredeemably lost forever. If we do not document the languages now, we deserve the contempt of later generations who will have no access to their languages. Without language documentation, what is needed for preparing teaching and learning materials for the language is simply unavailable. Language revitalization fatefully depends on the availability of language documentation.

Importantly, language documentation and language revitalization often are not independent activities, but are intertwined and mutually supportive. For example, many documentation projects train community members who become part of the documentation team and who at the same time often use their training in service of the communities' lan-

guage conservation efforts. To cite one example, in the SYLAP program (Shoshone-Goshute Youth Language Apprenticeship Program), young people helped to prepare a talking dictionary, part of the documentation of this language; they were trained in the technology, and then they recorded elders who were native speakers for the sound clips for the dictionary. In the process, they learned much more Shoshone (part of the revitalization effort), but also their interest and documentation activity brought the generations together and awakened enthusiasm in the community for the language, resulting in much more support for and interest in revitalizing the language among community members.⁵ This is but one example, but it shows clearly that language documentation and revitalization need not be considered separate activities and are not at odds with one another. More and more, language documentation is not just in the hands of a single scholar who is an outsider to the community. Very often, the documentation is done by teams with at least some members of the language community participating. In many cases, those doing the documentation are themselves linguistically trained members of the community who also are concerned with revitalization of their language. Very often decisions about what is actually documented and how the documentary materials will be used are in the hands of community leaders and elders.

As many publications make clear, documenting a language can also be morally fulfilling, can support and foster language revitalization, and is absolutely necessary for communities concerned with the survival of their languages. The kind of comparison that Mufwene calls for in order to get a broader understanding of LEL clearly depends on the actual language documentation projects being done, which collect the correlated ‘ecological’ metadata such an approach requires. That is, this comparison also is not independent of the language documentation and language revitalization efforts for particular endangered languages.

In short, when it comes to the moral obligations of linguists, as has been said in the literature, if we do not document the languages now while it is still possible to do so, we will deserve the rebuke of future generations for not providing them with the means to learn about their linguistic heritage and to learn their languages. Not even in Hollywood’s wildest imagination can an utterly dead language with no documentation be cloned and brought back to life. It is document now or forever deserve censure for our negligence. Helping to provide adequate documentation is one of the greatest services linguists and other scholars can render to communities whose languages are under threat.

6. LANGUAGE BIRTH AND CULTURAL LOSS. Mufwene devotes considerable attention to language speciation (the birth of new languages). He says: ‘the study of LEL must certainly be connected to genetic linguistics, which shows language speciation, thus an increase in the number of languages, whereas the literature on LEL has been forecasting a drastic and rapid decrease in the number of languages around the world’ (p. e219). He says further: ‘it appears that we may learn a great deal from balance sheets of births and deaths of languages’ (p. e209). He concludes that ‘we must discuss LEL in terms of both gains and losses, even if we cannot produce an exact balance sheet of births and deaths’ (p. e219).

It is true that language endangerment literature has not dedicated attention to the emergence of new languages, for example, the diversification of languages into multiple related languages or the development of new creoles (or the emergence of new mixed languages), but it is hard for us to see this in terms of a ‘balance sheet’. The birth

⁵ See <http://shoshoniproject.utah.edu/sylap/>, accessed May 14, 2017.

of a new child can hardly balance or displace the bereavement over the loss of another. Of course linguists are interested in both language ‘speciation’ and language ‘loss’, but it is hard to see them as complementary processes; all empirical evidence confirms that, while emergence of new languages is slow and infrequent, language extinction is now alarmingly frequent and is happening at a much more accelerated rate than in the past (see above)—gains fall far short of balancing losses here, if we are speaking in terms of sheer numbers. Mufwene suggests that this kind of balance-sheet knowledge ‘would help us assess from a historical perspective whether language shifts have typically been deleterious to the affected populations’ (p. e209). While it may not be necessary that affected populations must always suffer negatively from language shift, deleterious effects from language loss both to individuals and to communities/societies affected are abundantly documented (see, for example Taff et al. 2018 for confirmation). Given its importance, it would not do to downplay the connections between language and physical, psychological, and social well-being.

Mufwene connects this question about deleterious effects with the question of ‘the relationship between language and culture’ (p. e220). He argues ‘against the position that losing one’s language is tantamount to losing one’s cultural singularity’ (p. e205), maintaining ‘that language and culture shifts do not go hand in hand’ (p. e206), that ‘a population can lose their language without *ipso facto* losing their cultural singularity’ (p. e206). He says, ‘some people may not worry about the loss of a particular language, because it is one communication tool or technology (Mufwene 2013) being replaced by another that meets their current needs’ (p. e204).

Perhaps it is good for Mufwene to remind us that a group could lose their language without necessarily giving up many nonlinguistic aspects of their culture and that ethnic identity and individual identity are not necessarily always closely linked with linguistic identity. It is true that ethnic identity can be based on such things as kinship, clan affiliation, religion, location, political units/nationality, ‘race’, ancestry, cultural heritage, and other nonlinguistic factors. Human groups can and do form alliances of various sorts for various reasons across language boundaries. However, this notwithstanding, language is the predominant determining factor for ethnic identification for the large majority of populations around the world, and this should not be played down or lost sight of.

It is true that in language shift it should be possible to find ways of expressing the group’s cultural concepts in the new language so that language shift need not necessarily mean cultural loss. The reality, however, is that in case after case, projects documenting endangered languages encounter loss of important parts of the associated cultures as people shift to another language. When a language is not learned by the next generation, typically the knowledge encoded in the language fails to be transmitted. Most obvious in many cases is loss of the cultural knowledge about the environment and ecology, about uses of traditional plants and animals, traditional modes of subsistence, fishing and hunting, horticulture, traditional medicines, and the many aspects of culture involved in ritualistic, poetic, esthetic, artistic, and other cultural functions of the language being lost, to mention a few. Loss of culture and the knowledge systems associated with endangered languages in language loss definitely should not be downplayed. Loss of linguistic diversity means loss in the range of potential ways of understanding the world.

7. CONCLUSIONS. To end, I repeat the question, theorizing about what? Languages have ceased to be transmitted to the next generation in circumstances both of active re-

pression and neglect and where energy and resources have been poured into their preservation; some languages have persisted under active oppression and in the face of many of the factors mentioned here that can influence speakers toward language shift. Any attempt to generalize about language vitality and language loss must keep in mind these realities that make the theorizing effort challenging at best. At the same time, we need to capitalize on what is already known about the causes of LEL and attempt to increase understanding of it in order to address scientific concerns and the needs of those whose languages are endangered.

Mufwene's article is certain to stimulate discussion of the important questions he has raised. The goal in this response is definitely not to detract from Mufwene's stimulating contributions, but to add perspective to that discussion.

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