

# Anthropology News

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Even as the SLA moves forward on a resolution about the need to protect endangered languages, we find such efforts castigated as “language bullying” in no less a medium than the *New York Times*. In this guest column, P Kerim Friedman examines the language of the *Times* article.

### **The Metaphor of “Endangered Languages”**

*By P Kerim Friedman (Temple U)*

On May 27, David Berreby wrote in the *New York Times* that while “the metaphor of ‘endangered languages’ is both easy to grasp and appealing to the sense of fair play,” it is politically motivated, and (even worse) unscientific. Berreby’s attack on this metaphor was prompted by an article in the May 15 issue of *Nature* which statistically compared the risk of extinction for animals against that of human languages, finding human languages to be the more “endangered” of the two. While Berreby might have legitimate quarrel with the scientific basis of this study, he chose instead to write an attack on the entire enterprise of language preservation.

Berreby argues: “Language bullies who try to shame a child into learning his grandfather’s language are not morally different from

the language bullies who tried to shame the grandfather into learning English.” He sees language preservation as an issue of concern only to linguists: “Just as the Poultry and Egg Council wants us to eat eggs, linguists want languages to study.” Moreover, Berreby is himself unconcerned about language loss. He argues that because languages are always changing, there is no threat of running out of languages, as one might run out of oil, or another natural resource. New languages, like Tok Pisin are also being formed. Moreover, dead languages can even be brought to life. He gives the example of Hebrew, which he claims “was brought back from ancient texts into daily use after 2,000 years.”

Two of Berreby’s claims were quickly attacked in the letters page of the *New York Times*. Leanne Hinton questioned the notion of linguists as “language bullies,” writing: “The movement toward revitalization of endangered languages is a community-generated process, not a linguist-generated process. Furthermore, it is the younger generations who are in the leadership roles.” And Shamira M Gelbman pointed out that Hebrew never went extinct, but was a living language which “existed as a second language alongside the various vernacular tongues spoken by Jews from ancient times through the modern era.”

But it is not Berreby’s factual inaccuracies that are most troublesome; rather, it is his own metaphorical hanky-panky. Berreby replaces the metaphor of languages as an “endangered species” with that of language as an endlessly renewable resource, not unlike solar power. This new metaphor obscures the issues at the heart of language endangerment. It isn’t “languages” in the abstract that are in danger. The concern is with specific languages, spoken by specific groups of people. As Alice Thor Pianfetti wrote in her letter to the *Times*, Berreby “dismissed and discounted the loss of culture, tradition and ethnic pride that accompanies the death of a language.”

To his credit, Berreby quotes James Crawford, who points out that language death does not happen in privileged communities, but “to the dispossessed and the disempowered, peoples who most need their cultural resources to survive.” However, Berreby feels that what’s done is done, and that attempts to turn back the clock are just as flawed as policies promoting linguistic unification. But why

should that be? I believe that Berreby is a victim of his own metaphor. Although he gives lip service to the political nature of language decline, he ultimately treats it as an unavoidable “natural” phenomenon. We shouldn’t concern ourselves, because new languages will naturally replace the old. Any interference with this natural process is bad because it is just as “political” as the past wrongs that were committed against the speakers of these languages. He fails to grasp that the process of language death only seems natural if you accept the power inequalities that cause it in the first place.

**P Kerim Friedman** (PhD candidate, Temple U) does research on attempts to preserve the endangered languages of Taiwan’s Aborigine population. An earlier version of this article appeared on his web log, Keywords, <http://keywords.oxus.net/>.

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Section News Index  
TOC