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Response and Rejoinder to Perley's 'Zombie Linguistics'

It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a linguist to pass through the 'Perley Gates': A response to Perley's 'Zombie Linguistics'

Joshua Nash

While many of the issues put forward by Perley (2012) regarding Zombie Linguistics, endangered languages, and processes of language documentation are perennial and his concerns accurate, there are several points in his argument which require deeper consideration. It is possible that Perley has argued these stances because professionally he is an anthropologist who has taken a linguistic approach to documenting a single language (Maliseet) and then holds that these methods are applicable to all, or at least most, language documentation and revival situations. Whatever the case, it seems he is claiming this is the first time such discussions have taken place in such fora and that his stance is unique in the linguistics and anthropology of language documentation. There are, as a result, some key discussions in linguistics regarding the use of metaphors in language description and documentation, the status of languages in revitalisation efforts, and similar concepts to Perley's emergent vitalities, which have been at the heart of some key language documentation programmes, and language revival efforts, at least here in Australia, which he has overlooked.

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Although Perley has identified some literature and perspectives relevant to language 'extinction' and the language documentation and digitisation debate, there are pertinent discussions which would have provided a more balanced view than Perley's regarding aspects of the language documentation situation, the methods linguists involved in this field use, and the products they produce in Australia and indeed in the world. My approach is largely methodologically rather than conceptually critical.

I congratulate Perley for creating and putting forward some controversial ideas. Such strong ideas invite debate. It is all too often in the present literature on linguicide that positivist perspectives prevail. We can be lulled into a false sense of security being surrounded by scholars and colleagues who support us and commend us on our scientific and social pursuits, which, of course, are driven as much by funding, as Perley makes us acutely aware, as what might or must be considered a social or personal obligation.

The tradition in which I have been schooled sees theory and praxis as value-driven; if methods, theory, and metaphors work, they should be used. If they do not, they should be discarded. Methods, theory, and metaphor bases always come with their concomitant assumptions, and unlike Perley's claims, several linguistics disciplines in Australia encourage their researchers and students to be extremely self-critical about the assumptions they place on their students and what we as linguists are capable of accomplishing. The fact that the linguistics discipline at the University of Adelaide where I work happens to be the one about which I know most is also not value-neutral or surprising. There are many projects which continue in this discipline which Perley has not identified which go against what Perley claims is unique to his work with Maliseet, and possibly too among some of his colleagues' research he mentions in his paper. Linguists are indeed 'sinners' and should be held accountable for their (non-) contributions to language documentation as much as any other scientists. Still, several points require comment, especially considering Perley is an anthropologist and not a linguist. It also does not seem he has done the necessary groundwork to make some of the claims he has made regarding language documentation methods and theory, particularly in Australia and more specifically in my discipline in Adelaide. Once again, such unwarranted claims held against linguists by non-linguists are also not new, nor valid.

While I am not claiming what happens in Adelaide linguistics' 'rhetoric is global' (cf. Perley 2012: 135), it is at least applicable to elements of the Australian language documentation situation. Because Australia plays a major role in current language documentation efforts (see, for example, the large number of papers presented by Australian participants at the two conferences on Language Documentation & Conservation in Hawai'i in 2009 and 2011), it is reasonable to take the state of affairs in Australia to be at least somewhat representative of trends in language and culture documentation in other parts of the world. This is because the amount of language death that has taken place here since colonisation is staggering and because Australian linguists have been influential in advancing methods and theory in descriptive linguistics in the past four decades.

Metaphors Zombies Live By?

Perley's discussion on metaphor in relation to language death, metaphors and emergent vitalities is far from new. Mühlhäusler's (1995) 'Metaphors Others Live By' and Goddard's (1996) response to Mühlhäusler's paper in 'Cross-linguistic research on metaphor' developed out of disagreements on not only what constitutes a language but more so what assumptions we place or do not place on how to pose metaphorically the languages and cultures we know and work with; that is, how we 'other' and/or 'otherise' languages and cultures. I was surprised not to see any mention of these references in Perley's article. Müller's (2008) *Metaphors Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking* also provides up-to-date technical consideration of the metaphor bases Perley considers, and once again it was unfortunate not to see the development of a more sophisticated apparatus in providing a foundation upon which his metaphor base proceeded. These are consistent topics in linguistic literature, and indeed literature relating to language documentation.

This absence brings me to another recent discussion in (Australian) documentary linguistics which Perley did not consider, namely two articles in the *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, Zuckermann and Walsh (2011) and Eira (2012). Both of these articles tackle similar issues to those Perley addresses, but in a much less emotionally heightened manner. They put forward current and relevant arguments regarding the status of methodological trends, e.g. Revival Linguistics, Zuckermann's own term, and the work of, among other groups and bodies in Australia, the Victoria Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL), for whom Eira works. Much of the focus of language documentation and revival methods has followed on from methods established in the 1970s by a group of Australian scholars initiated by Dixon, published as a grammar in Dixon (1972). These efforts arising out of producing technical linguistic tools and apparatus have also produced similar products to Perley's emergent vitalities, e.g. song books (Schultz et al. 1999), picture dictionaries (Brown 2007), and community language guides (Amery 1994), which are more applicable to the language teaching of the Australian equivalent of what Perley terms heritage languages. Even though these incentives could possibly be taken by some as being tokenistic, although I personally do not think they are, they are certainly steps forward for language documentation in Australia and have set the trend for other linguistic revitalisation and 'zombie resurrection campaigns'.

Monaghan's (2012) 'Going for Wombat' brings to the fore questions of essentialism, racism, and community involvement in language and cultural documentation in South Australia. Questioning the ethno-commercialisation of Aboriginality, Aboriginal languages, and the role of indigeneity in language, Monaghan places a question mark on the validity of the reconstructed Wirangu language, found in the West Coast of South Australia, as 'both a product of the need for distinction and a vehicle for the establishment of a range of ethno-commercial activities' (p. 48).

Monaghan emphasises the nature of the political ambiguities associated with language, social and cultural ideologies and language politics through the use of two emergent vitalities in the form of two recently produced local cultural products:

Wardugu Wirn (Going for Wombat, a bilingual picture book, Miller 2005) and the Big Wombat (constructed 2009), a tourist attraction which reifies the Wirangu concept of *Wardugu Wirn*:

Wardugu Wirn is a celebration of local cultural practices and identity as well as a powerful tool for their transmission to younger children. In this sense, the production is essentially inward looking, and the success of the book in reaching a wider public audience is in some ways irrelevant to the participants in the project. Much of the power of the book derives from the way it presents known community members engaged in a culturally significant activity. Going for wombat is a key symbol (Ortner 1973) that plays a central role in grounding local Aboriginal identity for Scotdesco residents. (Monaghan 2012: 55)

Monaghan's presentation of the commodification of language within the language revival situation, although strongly questioning the role of linguists as gatekeepers or custodians of linguistic and cultural knowledge, as Perley also questions, demonstrates how community materials as 'emergent vitalities' and approachable tools are not new to language revival or the language revitalisation situation.

Who came before?

All of these papers I mention are written by linguists who are to a large extent (self-)critical of themselves as linguists and/or the linguists, anthropologists, and missionaries who have come before them. It is naïve to think that linguists' hands, in whatever guise and under whatever circumstances, are spotless (whatever that may actually mean). Most linguists who have worked in particularly isolated or challenged communities have become acutely aware of the need to be sensitive to these needs to their best ability. As Mühlhäusler (1996) narrates in his *Linguistic Ecology*, another key and oft-quoted and read publication which Perley ignored, linguists are responsible for documenting and upholding and even saving the linguistic diversity in Australia and the Pacific; they do not merely stand and note down these details as their research objects die a slow, or oftentimes quick, death. In his lengthy review of the book, Siegel (1997) takes exception to Mühlhäusler's broad-ranging and seething criticism of linguists; that is, that they are mainly interested in 'rats in alcohol' preservation techniques of grammar writing, a view shared by Perley in his critique of the choice of metaphors used by linguists in their documentation techniques. While Mühlhäusler's and Siegel's disagreement is fundamentally related to their respective schoolings in different types of approaches and means to linguistic description and hence language documentation, the relevance and worthiness of their discussion to Perley's presentation still holds: linguists are responsible for producing technical as well as digestible products for the academy and speakers of languages, respectively.

Because this discussion is now more than one and a half decades old, and through my identifying other directives and projects which have taken up several of the gauntlets raised by both Mühlhäusler and Siegel, I feel justified in suggesting that Perley should have consulted these works. I feel some of his statements are repetitious,

outdated, and almost redundant, considering the inroads modern language documentation efforts have taken since this time. We must remember: someone has to do the language work, whether they are untrained or trained as linguists, historians of language, or anthropologists. It is also questionable whether Perley's account of endangered languages would have inspired more graduate students of anthropology and linguistics to work with Native American communities or any other language endangerment situation.

Furthermore, as a result of the claim of uniqueness associated with Perley's documentary linguistic work, e.g. production of a language DVD, it is difficult to take some of Perley's claims seriously. It is also definitely true that many communities are not always happy with linguists, anthropologists, or film makers creating living language resources such as DVDs because of the sensitive nature of some of the information they present. This is not said in any way as a criticism of Perley's DVD, which I have not seen. I say this because the creation of DVDs and other more technologically advanced emergent vitalities are not necessary any more representative of what a language group wants than the often impenetrable works linguists produce.

Perley quotes Daryl Baldwin, a member of the Miami Nation of Oklahoma, at a symposium in 2011 at Perley's University as saying, 'maybe these academics are wrong. Maybe we can reconnect' (Perley 2012: 143–144). I am sure Baldwin is correct: academics are wrong, as are the anthropologists, missionaries, and whom-so-ever who came before them. It is not necessary, as Perley does, to remind linguists that their present work in the field and in the academy lies on the back of generations of racism, colonialism, linguicide, and death. However, as a scientific endeavour, steps forward in language documentation, and indeed the creation of 'emergent vitalities' (Perley's expression) and their associated metaphors must indeed be taken separately from what lies in this sordid past. Mühlhäusler (1996) reminds us too well of these issues as well.

Wanted - dead or alive

In addition to several of the community tools I have listed above, there has been much valuable work on the ground in producing usable and approachable tools which possibly even 'linguistic zombies' or 'zombie linguists' can use. The Australian linguists Amery and Gale have for more than two decades developed a large corpus of both academic and community based work on South Australian languages, especially Kurna, a language Perley lists in his article (p. 143) without giving any further details. These programmes involve the creation of language-based tools, such as a funeral liturgy booklet (Amery & Rigney 2006) that also resulted in an academic publication (Amery & O'Brien 2007), teaching grammars, word lists, learner's guides, curriculum resources, and radio shows in Kurna.

There are also many other programmes in Australia, such as the Norfolk Island language project, which I have been involved in for the past five years, which has produced tangible and aesthetically pleasing language products (e.g. Mühlhäusler, Nebauer-Borg & Coleman's *Ucklan's Norfolk* [Our Norfolk Language] 2012) for sale at

the Norfolk Island Museum. I mention the Norfolk language not because I am involved with the project and wish to emphasise the work done on the language; I say this because I am privy to how much work this project has achieved over more than a decade of serious documentary linguistic work and involvement by 'outsiders' with work that otherwise would most likely never have been carried out by the speakers of the language themselves.

The sale of materials associated with the Norfolk language project benefits the local language speakers both financially and in terms of their linguistic self-esteem. However, as an emerging and exploratory scientific discipline, the production of these products should never come at the (metaphorical or literal) cost of producing technical linguistic analyses and documents which benefit the academy and are of interest to linguistic typologists, historians of language, and sociolinguists.

We must also remember that there is a multitude of international email lists and groups, such as the Australian-based Research Network for Linguistic Diversity, the journal *Language Documentation & Conservation* published by the University of Hawai'i, and the Language Documentation & Conservation conference series, which will be held for the third time in 2013. All these fora deal with technical (hardware-based issues), methodological, and theoretical issues related to language and cultural documentation. Like Perley, I agree that these efforts should not stand alone, aside from, or distanced from community involvement through focusing overly on the technical (hardware-based or linguistic) side of this documentation. However, what Perley fails to address sufficiently is that current research and perspectives in language documentation and its associated metaphors, although far from perfect, show a distinct difference from the 1950s and 1960s perspectives on salvage linguistics to which Perley implicitly alludes.

By the end of Perley's article, and particularly after *anthropologist* is substituted with *linguist* in his possible reinterpretation of Vine Deloria Jr's *Anthropologists and other friends*, I started getting the feeling that perhaps Perley poses linguists as the zombies rather than the languages they are meant to be saving. Although this may indeed be true, considering that neither (living) anthropologists nor (dead and/or living) linguists generally have great dress sense, it is definitely not the case that 'linguists as linguists' and 'only the linguists' are to blame, if indeed there is any blame to be given at all. As Monaghan makes clear declaring what any field linguist who has worked in any sensitive language documentation situation would know: there are many levels at play. At least some of these levels need to be considered when giving a detailed critique of what is, granted, a newly developed and developing field in linguistics. It is with this mood of inquiry and questioning I have written this response and it is by way of an invitation for comment to others I round off my piece.

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