Things people speak?: a response to Orman's 'Linguistic diversity and language loss: a view from integrational linguistics' with rejoinder

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ABSTRACT

This article is presented in two parts. The first is a response to Orman's integrationist critique of orthodox theorising of linguistic diversity and language loss. It asks how integrationist claims might be empiricised and translated into a practical research programme. A discussion of the ontology of Norf'k and the pitfalls of employing metalinguistic terminology is followed by the second part: an argument claiming an integrationist investigation of language loss/death is possible if conceived as a lay-oriented enquiry.

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I read with interest Orman's article on linguistic diversity, language loss/death, and integrational linguistics in a recent number of *Language Sciences* (2013, 40). He offers a clear explication of what Harrisian integrationism is in terms of modern linguistic theory and how it deals with its own critique of mainstream linguistics and indeed modern approaches to language documentation and 'saving languages'. However, Orman offers few clues as to what integrationism can do for *things people speak*[2] and any other reified or non-reified ideation of language, or whatever linguists or others choose to label as their "first-order" research object.

While I agree with much of his critique of the mainstream linguistic diversity and language loss/death literature, by focusing on the *not* in his argument (what integrational linguistics is *not*), I believe Orman has avoided the *is* of his defence. By taking a strongly theoretical and philosophical approach to a historical fiercely practical discipline like linguistic diversity

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[2] By using this rather inelegant expression, I am avoiding a connection to any Hymsean use of 'ways of speaking' (e.g. Hymes, 1974).

studies and language documentation, it appears he may have thrown out the baby (saving languages and understanding ways of speaking and first-order phenomena) with the bathwater (integrationism's rejecting of the possibility of 'language' and 'a language'; the claim that metalinguistics cannot be culture neutral).

Orman can of course be excused for this – it was not a part of his brief. What remains, and what I was left wondering was: What would a practical and empirical integrationist perspective look like when considering the ontological basis of language and its relationship to aspects of modern language documentation and revival, if indeed such a perspective is congruous or possible? As a linguist with some training in integrational approaches to language (though not necessarily Harrisian integrational linguistics) and ecolinguistics, the empiricisation and description of a few of Orman's integrationist claims would certainly help me, and I would hope other linguists and other scientists, in approaching their 'first-order' object of study. I also hope these descriptions could and would be able to exist aside from any metalinguistic terminology one attaches to these first-order phenomena. My piece will be exploratory and consider the 'things people speak' or 'what people speak' instead of using language or 'way of speaking' to make sense of Orman's argument and a possible empiricisation of integrationism vis-à-vis studies in linguistic diversity and language loss.

Norf'k is what the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers speak on Norfolk Island, South Pacific (see Mühlhäusler, 2011 for historical and linguistic details). What Norf'k is, whether it is an indigenous language, or indeed a language at all is far from clear. Whatever it may be, it has been recognised as an endangered language by UNESCO (2007). I have worked on Norfolk Island and Norf'k for more than 7 years. I have heard people speak Norf'k, a 'thing people speak' distinctly different from other 'things people speak' in Australia, New Zealand, and New Caledonia, the closest inhabited neighbours to Norfolk Island. Norf'k has had many names, many positive and negative interpretations, and which only seem to make sense when spoken in the ecology where it was introduced and continued to develop – Norfolk Island. I have recently published a documentary account of Norfolk Island placenames (Nash, 2013), wherein I describe how arriving at an understanding of the situatedness and ecological embeddedness of Norfolk toponyms is crucial to appreciating not necessarily what the Norf'k *is*, or how Norf'k can be characterised, but more so how important toponyms are to understanding the *nature* of what Norf'k is and how Norf'k *works* linguistically, socially, and ecologically.

While I do not label my approach to this understanding of toponymy and language documentation integrationist by any means, an ecolinguistic analysis of toponyms and other linguistic and non-linguistic artefacts (words, expressions, other verbal and non-verbal behaviours) considers the elements (and even non-elements) of the contextualisations of things people speak which integrational linguists like Harris and Orman espouse. My collection, analysis, and interpretation of Norfolk toponyms in terms of Norf'k and English on Norfolk Island have, in a similar way to Orman, led me to conclude:

> Does this then ultimately leave the integrationist with nothing consequential to say qua integrationist on the politics of such 'segregational' issues as language endangerment/loss? This might well be the case although it would perhaps be more in line with integrational thinking to leave the question open based on the recognition that each instance of language endangerment/loss will be embedded in a unique mesh of contextualising factors, thus rendering the advancement of any blanket formula to such issues an unwarrantedly essentialist and decontextualised approach.
>
> (Orman, 2013: 9)

The Norf'k situation is a single case and possibly not applicable to other situations. My Norfolk research has led me to two scientific and personal realisations:

1. "What Norf'k is typologically does not affect how Norf'k is used in Norfolk toponymy" (Nash, 2013: 24).
2. There is a strong requirement to look at the role of singular cases in measuring and theorising about how people speak rather than striving to arrive at universalist or generalisable claims about the nature of language, ways of speaking, and human communication and/in context, whatever these concepts may mean or how they are managed.

Such an approach may be 'conclusion poor' but it may actually get us closer to understanding and approaching what our research object, way of speaking, or language we are observing (or participating in, or are a part of, or contextualising through our metalinguistic terminology) actually is.

Before inviting Orman to respond I would like to reflect on some of his claims to speculate about an answer myself. What are linguists (or anyone) to do to avoid a "non-committal cop-out" (Orman, 2013: 9), regardless of whether action is "entirely consistent with integrationism's wider scepticism in relation to the locus of expertise in linguistic matters and consequent reluctance to embrace any kind of prescriptive model"? Orman is clear about what integrationism's position is on the politics of language: "What it does not offer is a specific alternative model of language and society to the one based on the language myth". He also concedes "integrational theorists have generally not shown much interest in issues of ethnicity, identity and other abstract categories of social classification which have featured prominently in more mainstream language-political discussions both within and beyond academia".

It is essential for us to ask a few clear questions regarding linguistic diversity and language loss. First, do we speak (or communicate or make utterances or open our mouths)? If yes, do we also agree there are many varieties of how people speak (or whatever an integrationist would call them)? If yes, what are we to do with them, especially if people have political, social, and emotional motivation to continue speaking these things? Does it really matter whether we use the labels language, a language, ways of speaking, codes, or modes of communication when there is 'language work' to be done, however this is to be conceived or perceived philosophically? Despite the structuralist or any of the other –ist/–ism tendencies of most

linguists engaging in language documentation and theorising about language loss as Orman claims, some language (or things people speak?) work *is* being done. Only time will tell whether such methods and theoretical outcomes are good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, and applicable to linguistic theory and language philosophy or not. My question to Orman is, and I ask not in a hostile tone rather with a spirit of optimism and an invitation for a response: How can integrational linguistics contribute to practical and empirical work into maintaining linguistic diversity? If it does not contribute in any tangible way, this would appear as good place as any to make this explicit. I wish to invite Orman to explicate, at least briefly, what in his terms an integrationist empiricisation of the claims he presented in his paper dealing with linguistic diversity and language loss may be. Orman gives some hints at what his answer would be:

> Does this mean that all talk of linguistic diversity and language loss/death should be abandoned? No, not necessarily. At least not in lay discourse where it may make perfectly good communicative sense to talk in such terms.

I am interested to know what a practical answer to this question 'at most' instead of 'at least' is or would be and indeed what it may, might, or should necessarily entail. No doubt metalinguistic terminology is always inadequate to talk about and describe the varied 'first-order things people speak' or 'speaking continua' (or whatever integrationists wish to call them) which exist on our planet. If we appreciate and concede that we are always restricted by our metalinguistic terminology and notions of 'language' and 'a language', then what can integrational linguistics qua Harris and Orman offer our understanding and appreciation that people want to 'preserve' or 'continue' how they speak and what they speak?

In offering an integrationist position, Orman notes an important point for the ontology of any scientific discipline:

> A science needs to meet the minimal requirement of having reliable criteria for demonstrating that two things are the same or different and criteria for saying whether one is dealing with one or two objects.
>
> (Mühlhäusler 2004: 286)

While I believe Orman has reliably demonstrated how integrationism and traditional approaches to linguistic diversity and language loss are different, he has not adequately shown how the traditional approach and any integrational approach is or would be a new approach (i.e. there would now be two approaches instead of one).

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Reply to Nash

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Nash's amicable and welcome response to my article raises a familiar complaint levelled against integrational linguistics, namely that it fails to provide an alternative empirical and practical research programme to the orthodox approaches which it subjects to such thoroughgoing theoretical critique (see, for example, Fleming, 1997). I am quite happy to concede that my paper neglects to do this since, as Nash is good enough to point out, it was not my primary purpose. He therefore invites me to spell out how integrationist claims might be empiricised in order to investigate linguistic diversity and instances of language loss. Now, although I do believe there is a way in which such issues can be approached from an integrationist perspective, I am not convinced that Nash is going to find what I have to say in this regard altogether satisfactory. In particular, I am not sure he will find the approach I propose sufficiently empirical or data-orientated and I will certainly stop short of providing the kind of positivist methodology he seems to be seeking, the reasons for which I will set out in due course.

Firstly, however, I would like to comment on a number of other points raised in Nash's response. Nash wonders what a practical and empirical integrationist approach to language documentation and language revival might look like. The short answer is that there is no such approach. From an integrationist perspective, the notions of language documentation or language description already beg fundamental theoretical questions, namely that there are such ontologically real entities as languages which can be neatly circumscribed and described. Language documentation is therefore not merely the 'fiercely practical' discipline he describes it as. The whole enterprise comes with a series of in-built and deeply problematic segregationist theoretical assumptions and indeed its products (descriptions of languages) are nothing more than an artefact of those assumptions. Just as there is no integrational syntax, phonology, morphology or semantics to rival orthodox approaches, there is also no integrational language documentation. This inevitably follows from the integrationist conception

of the linguistic sign as radically indeterminate. No determinate sign, no determinate system of signs. What an integrationist perspective instead offers is the possibility of an alternative understanding of what is going on when 'a language' is documented, namely a form of metalinguistic systematisation rather than a description of some empirical first-order linguistic reality. Now, this is not to deny that there may be some viable or useful purposes (e.g. pedagogical) for producing metalinguistic systematisations. The integrationist point however is that those engaged in such initiatives ought at least to understand the nature of the activity they are undertaking and this cannot be achieved on the basis of an adherence to a segregational view of language and communication.

In relation to his own research on Norfolk Island, it is apparent that Nash agonises somewhat over the ontological status of his object of study, Norf'k. He is reluctant to affirm Norf'k as a language or even a variety and settles on describing it as a 'thing people speak'. The initial concern here is that labelling Norf'k as a 'thing' suggests we are dealing with some kind of real-world object or reified entity. From the point of view of integrational theory, however, there are no linguistic objects. Consequently, the term 'way of speaking' may be preferable on this count, although Nash is quite right in wanting to avoid any association with the Hymsean notion of 'ways of speaking' which is still very much based on a segregationist conception of the linguistic sign. Whatever formulation one decides on, the next and more important question which then arises is what kind of theoretical load one is to attach to it. If it is held to refer to some determinate phenomenon objectively identifiable by the linguist on the basis of structural criteria, then it would seem to have little more to recommend it than the term 'a language'. The indeterminacy of what Norf'k is (or indeed any language, dialect, way of speaking, etc.) is a simple corollary of the indeterminacy of the linguistic sign, which is the foundational principle of an integrational philosophy of language. One can certainly accept that Norf'k may be recognised by both islanders and outsiders as a thing that is spoken or a way of speaking, etc. For the integrationist, however, the key point is that what that thing actually constitutes is a question which must be left open-ended since it will always be subject to varying contextualisation by different individuals in different circumstances. There is consequently no guarantee of absolute consensus on the matter. As Mühlhäusler (2011: 678) has noted:

> There is little agreement as to what the language actually is. It has proven very difficult for linguists to draw a boundary between Norf'k and colloquial English and Norfolk Islanders are often unsure whether an expression such as *jump dar fence* 'to have extramarital relations' is an English expression or a Norf'k one.

This, from an integrationist viewpoint, is just what one would expect. It is only in the idealised homogenous speech community postulated by orthodox linguistics that one would expect to find absolute consensus about what belongs to the language and what does not. However, no such communities exist and the linguist is in no position to supply a better or more correct answer to the question of what actually constitutes any community's language, even less so one would imagine in those cases where the community in question can hardly even be said to possess the concept of 'a language'. To loosely paraphrase Roy Harris' famous remark from *The Language Makers*, one could say that Norfolk Islanders have the only concept of Norf'k worth having, which is not say that all islanders have the same concept of Norf'k. Now, what that concept is, how that concept varies between islanders, how that concept varies circumstantially and over time and whether there are even some islanders who lack such a concept are all matters for empirical investigation which can be conducted without succumbing to any segregational assumptions. As Roy Harris states on his personal website[3]:

> What particular language (or variety of a language) individuals regard themselves or others as speaking is a question open to empirical research. This is research into the popular use of language-names and descriptions (such as English, Glaswegian, Cockney, slang, etc.). The answer will vary in different cases. It cannot be answered in advance by postulating that every such designation corresponds to some specific system of linguistic 'rules', of which the speakers themselves may be only dimly or unconsciously aware. That is neither a 'scientific' nor even a plausible assumption.

In other words, an integrationist approach to the issue will seek to discover how individual speakers construe and make sense of their own linguistic experience in terms of the metalinguistic labels and categories they apply. As far as language loss/death, language shift or linguistic diversity are concerned, any integrationist study must also take place on the same basis, that is to say as an investigation into the extent to which and the manner in which such notions are a reality for lay speakers and the consequences thereof. Certainly, no integrationist would seek to deny that many individuals and communities do indeed find themselves in situations in which they articulate experiences of and thoroughgoing concerns about language loss and language death. However, from an integrationist point of view the notions of language loss/death and language shift, like language change, are not empirical phenomena in the way they uncontroversially are for the structural linguist. They are instead explanatory attempts to account for certain perceived differences in macrosocial linguistic behaviour over time. As Harris (2003: 50) notes, the mistake of orthodox linguistics is to treat such notions as theoretical postulates when they are instead themselves in need of explanation, i.e. confusing an explicans with an explicandum. This has the result of obscuring from view the communicational processes which give rise to those notions in the first place.

An integrational approach to such segregationist topics as linguistic diversity and language loss is therefore possible if conceived as a lay-oriented enquiry. As for a research programme and methodology, this I am reluctant to supply and believe it is a question best left open and up to the individual researcher. As Harris (1997: 304) observes, in stipulating a precise methodology one risks merely producing an analysis which reveals and confirms nothing more than theoretical assumptions

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[3] http://www.royharrisonline.com.

built into the methodological procedure. However, for an example of how an integrationist study of lay metalinguistic knowledge might be conducted, see Davis (1997).

Nash asks whether integrational linguistics can make any contribution to practical and empirical work into maintaining linguistic diversity. It is important to remind oneself that the notion of linguistic diversity plays no role in an integrationist account of first-order linguistic behaviour. The kind of linguistic diversity Nash has in mind is, as I explain in the article, for the integrationist a form of *meta*linguistic diversity predicated upon the use of different language names. An integrationist in flippant mood might say that if Norfolk Islanders wish to ensure the survival of Norf'k they should continue to insist that whatever they speak is Norf'k and just *is* different from Colloquial English or Standard English, etc. After all, from an integrationist perspective, who is the linguist or indeed any outsider to argue? The metalinguistic diversity will thereby be preserved. Obviously, such an argument is not likely to prove particularly satisfactory to anyone concerned but it highlights the theoretical point that the survival of a language ultimately depends on the survival of its metalinguistic label. Can integrationism provide any sort of methodology or practical programme in order to ensure the continuation of linguistic practices which give rise to the use of particular metalinguistic labels? No, I rather doubt it and indeed it would seem well beyond its theoretical remit to do so. It must be remembered that integrationism is at base a semiological theory offering an alternative account of what goes on in first-order communication. It offers an opportunity for understanding and the demythologisation of the metalinguistic practices of both lay people and 'expert' linguists. Whether one ultimately comes to accept or reject the integrationist account is another matter.

Nash wonders whether all this theorising and philosophising is really necessary or helpful when there is apparently so much 'language work' to be done. My answer is that it is unavoidable if a fuller understanding of the relevant issues is to be achieved. After all, there is no ontologically neutral language work. Any account one gives of linguistic phenomena implies a certain view of language and of languages. To take up Nash's question, I would therefore argue that it *does* matter in what terms we, as linguists, choose to describe linguistic phenomena. Certainly, from an integrationist perspective there is no theoretical justification for using such positively misleading terms as 'code'. The theoretical dimension of linguists' work 'in the field' is inherent and inescapable however practically-minded it may appear for the simple fact that there is no objective vantage point from which linguistic facts can be established. Eventually, the language revivalist or documenter must be confronted with the question of what exactly it is that s/he is attempting to revive or document. A determinate, real-world, empirically verifiable object or a metalinguistic extrapolation from a language name? For integrationists, the answer is clear. One wonders though whether language revival or preservation activists would espouse their cause with quite such fervency if they believed all they were seeking to secure was the continued use of a metalinguistic label. It is therefore unsurprising that they would appear to count very few integrationists amongst their number.

An integrationist might also wonder whether all this 'language work' (documentation, revival, preservation, etc.) deemed so necessary is anything more than a mere artefact of the theoretical assumptions of the orthodox linguist. This is of course not to deny that communities may wish to document and preserve what they regard as their language, dialect, way of speaking, etc and undertake endeavours to do so. The question is what role the linguist ought to assume vis-à-vis such activities. Should the linguist be an active participant in such initiatives or merely an observer? This inevitably raises questions of politics, morality and responsibility. Harris (1997: 309) makes the following pertinent and provocative observation:

> As some linguists have learned to their cost, "collecting data" and "writing grammars of the local language" are not always regarded by suspicious foreign governments or populations as the innocent occupations those bland descriptions suggest. But the fact that missionary linguists sometimes end up in tribal cooking pots is no more surprising than the fact that even well trained troops end up as casualties. This is simply the sharp end of a reminder to the effect that there is no such thing as a socially neutral professional linguistics, any more than there is a socially neutral professional militarism.

In talking of tribal cooking pots Harris' is obviously a playing a strong rhetorical card but his point is nevertheless valid. Who decides what 'language work' is to be done and for what purpose? The orthodox linguist on the basis of his/her prior theoretical, methodological and socio-political assumptions or the communities and individuals concerned? If the linguist is to avoid polluting his/her subsequent account with such assumptions, then s/he has no option but to base it on the manner in which such communities and individuals articulate their linguistic experience through the deployment of their own metalinguistic terminology and categorisations. In other words, adopting an integrational approach requires the linguist to take the seemingly paradoxical and perhaps unwelcome step of renouncing his/her *a priori* claim to expertise in matters linguistic.

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