EXPANDING THE CANON: MINORITIZATION IN THE WORLD *AND* IN LINGUISTIC THEORY

When Minoritized Languages Change Linguistic Theory

Andrew Nevins

There have been many recent books on the issue of language endangerment, and most of these have focused on the sociopolitical causes and consequences of language endangerment and the importance of endangered languages in terms of cultural, historical, and linguistic diversity. This book is an attempt to 'roll up one's sleeves' theoretically in terms of discussing the consequences of phenomena such as root suppletion, circumoralized nasal consonants, or biclausal sources for ergative case and how these languages have specifically posed problems – and accompanying solutions – for theoretical linguists per se. Moreover, many of the languages discussed within are not particularly 'endangered' – Basque, Kaingang, Xhosa, Zazaki, and American Sign Language, for example all have very large numbers of speakers – but nonetheless these languages are still minoritized in terms of their representation in linguistic theory, as languages of international scientific, political, or commercial exchange, and as such are often rarely monolingually spoken even within their own borders.

Given the attention to how relatively unknown languages or cultural groups are invaluable to preserve and valorize for reasons of linguistic, cultural, and anthropological diversity, this book demonstrates already-documented triumphs in each major cornerstore of linguistic theory where these languages have had far-reaching scientific consequences. As such, it presents specific results that can be pointed to in order to complement the discussions in the above-cited books.

"This excellent survey of influential analyses of phenomena in a variety of less commonly studied languages puts a nail in the coffin of the myth that only standardized, national languages have contributed to linguistic theory and that formal linguistics has been based only on widely spoken languages. By highlighting important contributions to linguistics made by careful analysis of less commonly studied languages, Nevins shows convincingly that all human languages are of interest to formal linguists."
Jason Merchant, Vice Provost and Lorna P. Straus Professor of Linguistics, University of Chicago

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MOTIVATION: FROM THE CLASSROOM

- In many corners of the world one can hear uttered the lament that "generative grammar was invented only for English", even by students. (I can understand where this impression comes from as the premiere textbook _Core Syntax_ contains but three examples from non-European languages!)

- However even early developments within generative grammar, such as Matthews (1965) and Postal (1963) were based on indigenous North American languages, both of which Hale (1967) evaluate as providing "indication of the extent to which a linguist working in the generative transformational framework can succeed in making interesting and significant statements about the grammatical structure of a language not his own"

- Nonetheless this sentiment persists, e.g. Foley & van Valin (1984,xii) :""much current and recent theorizing has depended too heavily on English and familiar European languages, with the result that this theorizing has been biased in favor of languages of essentially one grammatical type"

- One aim of this book was to debunk this conception, by showcasing over a dozen well-entrenched moments in the recent history of the field in which generative linguistic theory has actively reformulated the notion of possible and representative linguistic structure based on compelling findings from non-familiar, and indeed minoritized languages — and to present these as part of a new canon for students.
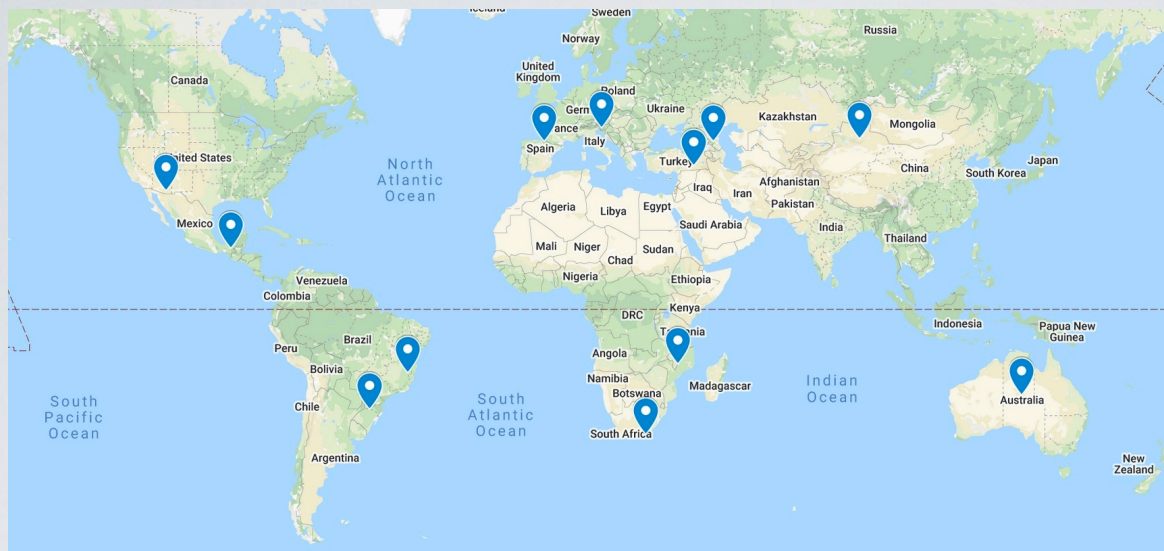
Map Locations:

1. Diyarbakır, Turkey
2. Ürümqi, China
3. Ladainha, Brazil
4. Nonoai, Brazil
5. Gernika, Spain
6. Tila, Mexico
7. Solkan, Slovenia
8. Makhanda, South Africa
9. Zomba, Malawi
10. Alice Springs, Australia
11. Tucson, USA
12. Great Slave Lake, Canada
13. Great Plains, USA
14. Black ASL, USA

"Narrowness in observation protects narrowness in theory."
– Wolfgang Köhler

Instead of merely demonstrating that contemporary theory can 'handle' phenomena found in lesser-studied languages, the book brings forth cases in which data from such languages actually changed linguistic theory, creating discomfort and a reshuffling of assumptions that eventually leads to modifications of the theory itself.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CASE STUDIES

- Zazaki and Uyghur forced the theory to change its semantics of indexicals in indirect speech reports

- Basque and Ch'ol required that the theory to change its assumptions about ergative as a lexical, as opposed to structural case

- Closest Conjunct Agreement in Slovenian and Xhosa motivate the need for linear order as indispensable in certain agreement phenomena

- Chichewa and Warlpiri transformed the theory of verbal structure to include applied arguments as part of a larger, but configurational VP

- Nasality in Maxakali and Kaingang force a rethinking of why *mama* and *papa* include the most natural of all consonants

- Symmetric hands in the phonology of Black ASL raise the stakes of representing allophonic two-handedness in sign phonology

- Hiaki and Chechen provide incontrovertible evidence that roots can supplete for number and this is distinct from when verbs can be turned into an uncountable mass events

CASE STUDY (CH. 4): CCA FOR SOUTHERN BANTU SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS

- Recent Sesotho, Xhosa, and Zulu experimental syntax comparison with Mark de Vos, Hlumela Mkabile, Hazel Mitchley, Onelisa Mcimbi, Thulani Speelman, Thasky Fatyi, Jochen Zeller, Andrew Bevis, Mfundo Didi, Neo Putini, Nonhlanhla Ntuli, Kristina Riedel, Maseanakoena Mokoaleli, Sinovuyo Manyongwana, Grace Maphisa, and Jana Willer-Gold

- Four conditions: Postverbal (no second conjunct agreement possible) vs Preverbal <u>Subject</u> Agreement — even though both have demonstrably moved outside the VP (cf Pietraszko 2022) — forcing a reconsideration of in-situ based theories of CCA (e.g. van Koppen, Boskovic)

- And exactly parallel patterns with Postverbal vs Preverbal **Object** Agreement — forcing a reconsideration of whether object CCA can be clitic doubling

- The patterns strengthen the evidence for Distributed Agree, in which linear order *can* play a limited role in morphosyntactic operations (*pace* Chomsky 1975)

REPRESENTATIVITY AND MINORITIZED LANGUAGES

- Minoritized languages may not always be there 'to work on later', as we know. Yes, I contend that it is appropriate to use the verbal participle 'minoritized' (or marginalized) as opposed to the adjective 'minority' (which is indeed, simply inaccurate for languages such as Xhosa or Zulu in South Africa, which have never been numerically minority, but have indeed been minoritized).

- Moreover, the term 'minority languages' potentially suggests an inherent quality – as opposed to what is actually the case: languages *become minoritized* as the contingent result of active choices and resultant actions carried out by agents ranging from political leaders to members of the scientific community themselves, with intentions that may range from sinister to negligent.

- As England (2007) points out, the Mayan languages have an unparalleled number of speaker- linguists and academic research output among all indigenous languages within the Americas, even though "the current state of linguistics in Guatemala must be understood against the background of a country that has been profoundly racist at every level".

- This constant state of diglossia (and one-way bilingualism) with dominant languages mean that, while signers of Black ASL must learn two other dominant languages – white ASL and American English within a larger sociolinguistic interactional scene, while the reverse does not hold.

- Minoritized languages, when historically excluded from use in government and in formal education, sometimes end up being used only at home and in social situations. *An immediate consequence is that they aren't spoken in class at universities, exactly where academics are doing their work.*

EPISTEMIC VIGILANCE
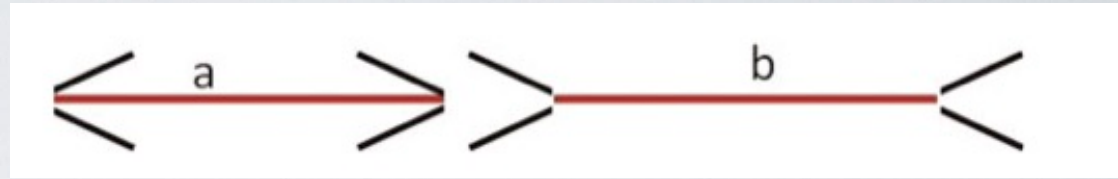
- Segall et al. (1966) found that the famous Müller-Lyer visual illusion, in which two lines of equal length have inward and outward-facing arrows and the latter usually appears longer, was not an illusion at all for San foragers of the Kalahari (nor for a variety of other worldwide populations). One cannot use the Müller-Lyer illusion to make broad claims about the way the human visual system works, based on the assumption that the illusory results for European populations represent the default, and the others as a deviation from the baseline.

- Perhaps quite the contrary is true – the results observed with people who do experiments in Europe might be unrepresentative of many aspects of human nature, if we wish to make claims about human tendencies, past present and future. An one potential example of how it may be the Western European languages that are 'weird' compared to others, consider Dahl's (1990) observation that "inversion as a device for marking yes-no-questions seems to be rather infrequent outside Europe", and Kiparsky's (1995) remarks on complementizer layers as but one particular historical outcome of the language lottery.

- I should stress that I do not necessarily subscribe to Henrich et al. (2010) classification of what they call 'WEIRD' cultures or languages as holding a typological cluster of common properties. But I fully embrace Henrich et al.'s (2010) methodological point, that we cannot rely on the convenience of samples of students and languages in our university classrooms as broadly representative of humanity, and must beware an all-too-easy "lack of epistemic vigilance underscores the prevalent, though implicit, assumption that the findings one derives from a particular sample will generalize broadly". Wray & Grace (2007) liken making conclusions about the human language faculty disproportionally on the basis of the languages most easily and most often studied *today* to trying to work out how humans jump over horizontal obstacles on the sole basis of watching the high jump event at the Olympic Games.

- If the fervent syntactic theorizing of North America that happened in the 1970s had instead taken place within institutions with speakers of Kamaiurá (which embeds only nominalized clauses) would the theory of the complementizers may have started on a different foot? Of course, starting with Kamaiurá and later getting to English, as opposed to starting with English and turning to Kamaiurá later, it may (and ideally will!) still end up as the same complete theory when all is said and done – if Kamaiurá is still around then, that is….

BROMHAM ET AL 2022
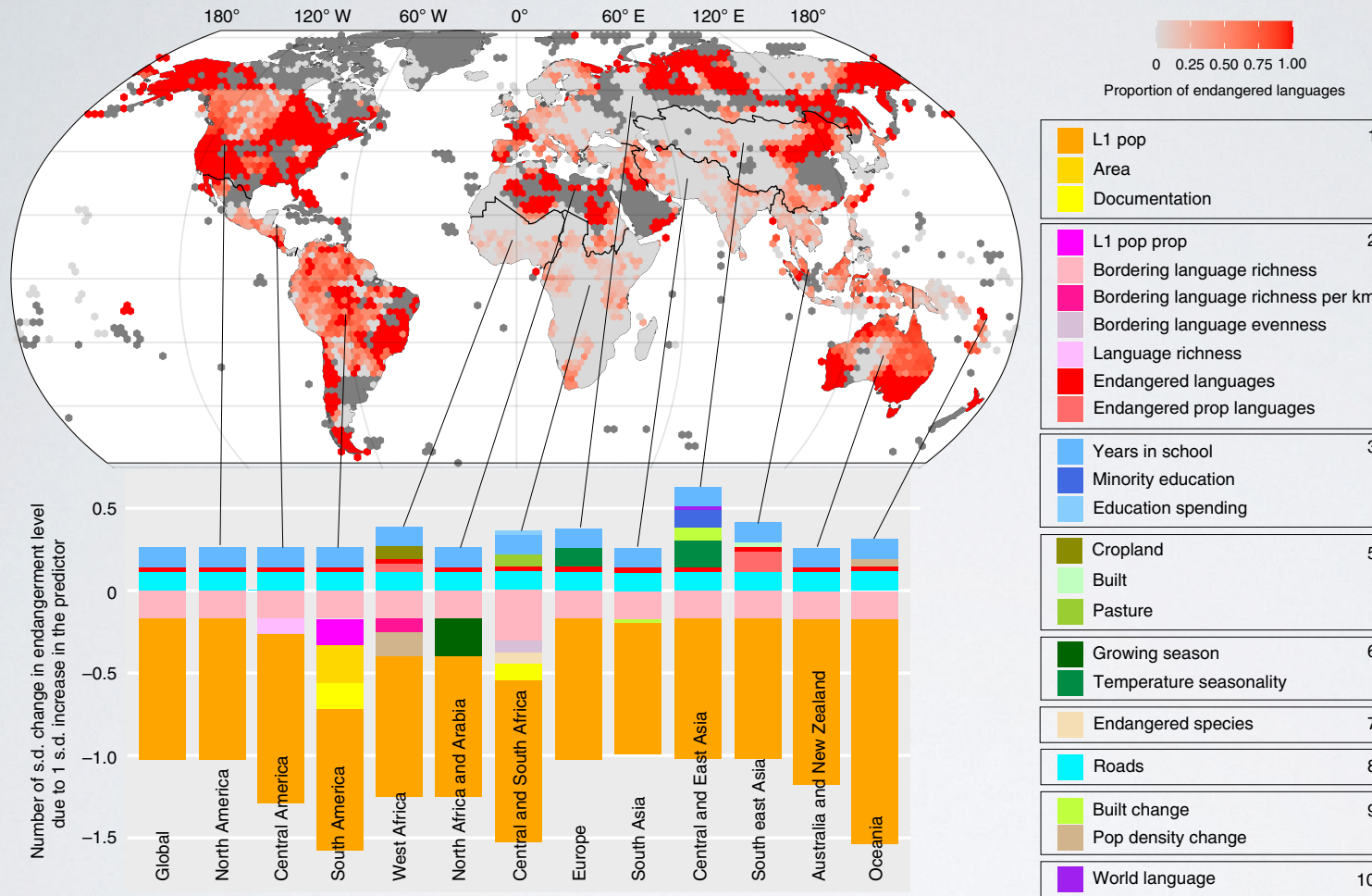
The Nine Languages that recurrently force local language shift: Arabic, English, French, Hindi-Urdu, Malay, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish

(And this dataset doesn't include many Roma varieties in the iso)

Fig. 1 | Current patterns of language endangerment expressed as the proportion of languages overlapping each hex grid that are currently rated threatened or above (EGIDS 6b–10; see Supplementary Information Table 1). Each hexagon represents approximately 415,000 km². The coloured bars show the predictors of level of endangerment identified in the best model for a global language database of 6,511 languages, and for each of 12 regions any additional influences on patterns of language endangerment (see Supplementary Data 3). Dark grey areas on the map do not have data for all the

Five predictors of language endangerment are consistently identified:
# of L1 speakers, bordering language richness, road density, years of schooling and the number of endangered languages in the immediate neighbourhood.

WHAT DO HEALTHY FUTURES FOR THE LANGUAGE SCIENCES CONSIST OF?

(Ch. 9; available at https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/007576)

- Continued work with minoritized languages, but perhaps also a rethinking of how it is done

- (Indeed, even NLP research has too often treated English as a 'default proxy for all languages' in ways that continue to perpetrate inequalities — and undermine its own goals (Bender 2019))

- There aren't enough Kurdish, Maxakali, Black ASL, Hiaki linguists and we should ask ourselves what can be done to change this

- How would linguistics have to change in order for more people from various racial identities to actively want to study, teach, and learn linguistics? (Hudley, Mallinson & Bucholtz 2020b)

- Minoritized languages might require changes in linguists' daily work

- Academic environments (and funding agencies) must change and refocus to (1) become more inclusive of minoritized linguists and (2) 'to serve the needs of the colonized communities whose languages have formed the foundation of linguistics scholarship and linguists' careers' (Degraff 2020)

COMMUNITY-BASED LANGUAGE RESEARCH

- Rice (2021) is one of many recent prominent voices calling for increased activism in our roles as linguists in securing continued rights, recognition, and representativity of languages of some of the world's *First Nations*. Czaykowsa-Higgins 2009 recognizes the importance of fieldwork and community-based language research that is done *for* the language communities, where the linguist may have the role of a consultant for a community-defined agenda.

- Gerdts 1990 enumerates ways that linguists can serve communities, including training teachers and helping teach the language, serving as mediators between speakers and universities, acting as advocates for native language programs at universities, and serving as expert witnesses on matters involving language, including place names for land claims, ethnobiology for land use studies, and labels and translations for museum exhibits. For many, this may end up leading to meaningful careers *outside* academia proper

- Field methods courses often provide minimal time for students to learn about the epistemologies of their speaker-collaborators and indigenous research methodologies (Tsikewa 2021) and the historical trauma that indigenous collaborators may experience in working on/with their languages — language archival data that the speakers themselves can access in a meaningful way (Seyfeddinipur et al 2019)

- Native Americans continue to be the least represented within the discipline, in contrast to the extreme presence of Native American languages in linguistic scholarship (Leonard 2020)

- Cojti-Cuxil 1990: "It is difficult in Guatemala for linguists to define themselves as neutral or apolitical, since they work on languages that are sentenced to death and officially demoted. The linguist who works on Mayan languages has the option of activism in favor of a new linguistic order in which equality in the rights of all the languages is made concrete"

STEPS TOWARDS INCLUSION AND EQUITY IN ACADEMIA

- Even as academics that are part of larger, external institutional structures, we often unconsciously internalize biases that perpetuate the treatment of minoritized, indigenous, or signed languages as afterthoughts or addenda in our teaching as well.

- How can we signal that Black Minds Matter? How can we reverse the trend of countless talented, valuable, intelligent young people of color who decide to 'opt out' of postgraduate careers in academia (Beasley, 2011)?

- "This disciplinary failure to recognize the racism/bias within linguistics is largely due to the deeply entrenched societal ideology that positions racism as 'intentional and individual', rather than structural and often below the level of awareness of those who enact it (Hill 2008; Hudley, Mallinson & Bucholtz 2020)

- Our everyday example sentences in linguistics — the empirical staple of the field — skewedly reflect a dominant white culture, far more than it does of minoritized races and ethnicities, often forgetting that "Who we hire, who we cite, and who we signal is a part of our field to our students and early career researchers has a large impact on its makeup. The shape of the world our example sentences convey to readers – students and active researchers alike – implicitly and sometimes explicitly sends powerful signals about who is welcome in our field and who is less so" (Kotek et al., 2021, p. 645).

UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

CLOSING REMARKS

- Paraphrasing Saussure (1916), the task of the linguist is to denounce and dispel the myriad of absurd ideas, fictions, and prejudices that arise in the domain of language.

- I contend that the field has had a modicum of success over the past three decades or so, and that minoritized languages have become protagonists within this narrative.