

‘LINGUISTIC SOCIAL WORK’ AND THE ‘HOPELESS CAUSE’: THE ROLE OF LINGUISTS IN ‘DEALING WITH’ ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

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The distinguished Africanist, Paul Newman, has described the endangered languages issue as a hopeless cause (1999: 11; see also 2003) and has complained about specialists in linguistics devoting much of their time to what he calls ‘linguistic social work’ (1999: 15). In his sights was Emmon Bach (2003) who ‘confessed’ to spending up to half his time in the field performing tasks of value to members of the local community: writing letters; making copies of audio recordings, negotiating with regional or national bureaucracies. Obviously this view impinges on the question of what beliefs and ideologies linguists have about endangered languages and whether these are in conflict with those of communities.

In this paper I want to re-assess the three planks of Newman’s platform: We linguists don’t care; we linguists care too much; our non-western colleagues don’t care and would be unprepared to help out even if they did. In so doing I will draw on my experience of Australian Aboriginal languages.

Contra the disparaging use of the term ‘linguistic social work’, I believe there is a good deal of work that linguists should be involved in which can have beneficial social effects. In the Australian context some of this amounts to educating people who are neither linguist nor Aboriginal about matters that can have significant effects on Aboriginal lives. I will report on two examples from my own work in the land claim/Native Title arena. Another form of ‘linguistic social work’ can be found in language revitalization as a means to improving the lives of the Indigenous people(s) affected. Based on some of my Australian work I would maintain that regaining language > regaining identity > regaining mental, physical and social health. So one goal of this paper is to rehabilitate the term ‘linguistic social work’ and encourage colleagues to engage in forms of ‘linguistic social work’ which go beyond the trivial and mundane.

I will also seek to demonstrate that – at least in the Australian context – the endangered languages issue is far from a ‘hopeless cause’.

Bach, Emmon 2003 Postcolonial(?) linguistic fieldwork. *The Massachusetts Review*; Spring 2003; 44, 1/2: 167-181.

Newman P. 1999. “We have seen the enemy and it is us”: the endangered languages issue as a hopeless cause. *Studies in the Linguistic Sciences*. 28(2):11–20.

Newman P. 2003. The endangered language issue as a hopeless cause. In M. Janse and S. Tol (eds.) 2003. *Language Death and Language Maintenance. Theoretical, Practical and Descriptive Approaches*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1-13.

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