

The Learned and the Sago-Sago: intralinguistic misconceptions and extralinguistic politics

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“Ignorant: a state of not knowing what a pronoun is, or how to find the square root of 27.4, and merely knowing childish and useless things like which of the seventy almost identical-looking species of the purple sea snake are the deadly ones, how to treat the poisonous pith of the Sago-sago tree to make a nourishing gruel, how to foretell the weather by the movement of the tree-climbing Burglar Crab, how to navigate across a thousand miles of featureless ocean by means of a piece of string and a small clay model of your grandfather, how to get essential vitamins from the liver of the ferocious Ice Bear, and other such trivial matters. It's a strange thing that when everyone becomes educated, everyone knows about the pronoun but no one knows about the Sago-sago” (Pratchett 1997).

Pratchett's witty and humorous definition of “ignorant” succinctly captures the problematic dismissal of the cultural knowledge and practices encoded in language (particularly endangered languages) by modern western science and society. This dismissal is often (as portrayed by Pratchett) a mixture of a *utilitarian* argument and a *political* argument: the *utilitarian* argument claims that these language-encoded cultural knowledge and practices (particularly of endangered linguistic communities) are inferior as knowledge-systems to modern science; the *political* argument, respectively, claims that endangered linguistic communities are essentially inferior (technologically, socially and sometimes morally) as cultures to modern western society.

Drawing from the recent literature on endangered linguistic communities and language death (Crystal 2000; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Dallby 2002; Abley 2005), the paper addresses both utilitarian and political arguments, with a greater emphasis on the latter. Using examples and case studies from Nettle and Romaine (2000), Abley (2005) and Harrison (2007), the paper first argues in response to the *utilitarian* argument that traditional knowledge of the natural world as encoded in language could (and indeed does) make to modern scientific research an indispensable contribution. The paper then moves on to address the *political* argument, arguing that its empirical and ethical implausibility demonstrates the essentially political nature of the relations between linguistic communities. The paper asserts that ascribing titles such as “ignorant” and “educated” to members of different linguistic communities is, in fact, an *unlearned* act, based, first, on popular intralinguistic misconceptions (primarily the language belief that languages differ in their levels of “primitiveness” and “progress”), and second, on an uncritical extralinguistic politics (i.e. the distribution of the relative significance of languages and linguistic communities according to their (dis)proportional political power). The paper concludes with the urgent need to develop public and professionals' awareness and critical thinking as to these intralinguistic misconceptions and extralinguistic politics (particularly in the context of endangered languages and communities), emphasizing linguists' responsibilities in partaking this effort (Crystal 2002; Dixon 2006).

References

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