

Muehlhaeusler, Peter, 1996. *Linguistic ecology. Language change and linguistic imperialism in the Pacific region*. London/New York: Routledge. xiv+396 pp.

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Muehlhaeusler's book, *LE* from now on, is about "linguistic heterogeneity, its decline and the costs of such decline. It is also a book about the study of human languages and the inability of most practising linguists to understand what is happening around them, that their very object if study is disappearing at an alarming rate ... The main thrust of this book is that an understanding of language death and ecological matters go hand in hand." (p 1). That is a tall order. Muehlhaeusler, M. from now on, weaves together the study of changes in language *ecologies* and the claim of linguistic imperialism and applies the result to the Pacific region. The definition of the notion of ecology, which he borrows from Haugen, is worth quoting:

"According to Haugen (1985), the ecology of language can be defined as interactions between any given language and its language ecology may be defined as the study of environment." (p 1)

Surely, Haugen did not say that! What M. means is that the notion of ecology describes the context of use of languages along with the backup systems they receive in a society and the worldviews they express. If this is so, and with diversity being a fact of life--the Pacific hosts more than 4,000 languages--diversity must reflect, and respond to, basic human needs. Endangering diversity is an undesirable disruption, and it is the mission of linguists to stem the destruction of language ecologies that leads to language death. As languages 'die' speakers don't (necessarily at the same time). And so resolutions to their communicative needs must be found. Pidgins, which M. likens to 'parasitic weeds', are one solution, but they, M. contends, further accelerate the decline and death of languages. One cannot fail to note that M. approaches his topic with strong personal convictions and an intensity that may blind his eyes of the facts. Siegel (1997) has shown in great detail where M. goes wrong. Let me add three points, one of principle, two of detail. The first one is that his contention that only diversity responds to human needs must be counter-balanced by the equally human desire to have *languages of wider communication*. How else could one explain that, e.g., Hindustani gained so much ground in India or that *sprachareals* can cut across languages of quite different genetic and typological affiliation. Both India and Aboriginal Australia present examples. M.'s worthy effort is somewhat one-sided. Two points of detail. For one, while the periodization of European contact with the Pacific (p 23) appears convincing in its simplicity, it is imprecise for many parts of the Pacific. For M. 1500-1750 marks the era of Spanish trade and exploitation; 1750-1830 that of scientific and anthropological discovery, followed by the modern economic exploitation, through whaling, sandalwood, trepang, and blackbirding) from 1830-1880; and the time between 1880-1975 is the era of colonial contact. As for Australia, it was the Dutch and French, not the Spanish, that made the discoveries. In his section of 'salient Properties' of the region, M. gives the number of Aborigines before 1788 as "1-2m" and "250" languages (p 31); on p 32 he mentions 300,000 inhabitants and 200 languages. Figures are for ever imprecise but the general consensus of experts is around 300,000 and 200+ languages. M. has no reference to any of his figures.

While one may quibble with many details of M.'s approach and beliefs, the underlying perspective is right: languages exist in a wider societal context, their 'ecology'. Their future is affected less by individual changes, say borrowing from other languages, than by the maintenance of their ecology. Language maintenance and revival efforts of declining or 'dead' languages, as are carried out for many indigenous Australian languages, will have little success unless an ecology or, one should perhaps say, a context, can be re-created that makes their use a natural consequence. The adoption of a wider perspective is certainly a healthy move. It is also in line with a concept of language as a repository of cultural knowledge that is so frequent amongst indigenous Australians. One hears often that no clear boundary is drawn between language and cultural knowledge. And one should perhaps add that such a wide notion is not entirely alien to Europeans either. Even lexicographers question the distinction between encyclopedic and linguistic meaning.

It should be clear that *LE* casts a wide net in discussing an ill-defined, but vast, area with over 4,000 languages. After general questions, some of which have been mentioned, M. turns to factors in the ecology that can, and have been, affected through colonial policies or the intervention of missionaries, and the like in Ch. 3. He then turns to the creation, development, and social role of pidgins and creoles. He maintains that pidgin languages "spread rapidly and outcompete others in a disturbed language ecology" and that they are "both consequences and agents of linguistic change" (p 75). But one cannot fail to see their function of permitting interaction in a situation in which no other options exist, although it is true that they tend to spread almost without inhibition. M. does not fail to note that pidgins and creoles can become repositories of

indigenous knowledge, that they may become an integral part of a (newly structure or repaired?) ecology. Unfortunately, M. does not discuss the issue of whether an ecology is still 'disturbed' when they become an integral part.

LE goes on to discuss case studies in the Pacific Island world (Ch. 5), expands on the roles of missions (Ch. 6), official, i.e. colonial, language policies (Ch. 7), the introduction and impact of literacy on ecologies that rely on oral modes of communication (Ch. 8), the role of foreign language teaching (or the introduction of other alien languages with their cultural background) (Ch. 9). Ch. 10-12 then return to the more principled questions of how people tackle situations in which their linguistic ecologies are messed up. In other words, there follows a discussion of language, shift, decay, and death in Ch. 10, a survey of the 'damage' done to structure and lexis of languages (Ch. 11), and a plea to preserve diversity (Ch. 12). An appendix argues for the scientific discipline of "Linguistics in the Pacific" to be set up.

As a whole, LE is a book rich in data, written with an applaudable scientific fervour, and an outlook to enrich the academic world. The Australianist will perhaps not find in it too much about indigenous Australia, but a lot that provides background and contrast to what has happened to the indigenous Australian language scene. Given the weaknesses in argument, errors in data and sources, etc. (Siegel 1997), it is hard to see how it can stand on its own in courses on Australian (or Pacific) linguistics. It should, therefore, be used along with other studies, such as the *Atlas* (1996) or specialist material on Australia.

References

Siegel, Jeff. 1997. Review of Muchlhaeusler, P., 1996. *Linguistic ecology*. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 17. 219-244.

Atlas of languages of intercultural communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas, 3 vols. Ed. by Stephen A. Wurm, Peter Muchlhaeusler, Darrell T. Tryon. 1996. Berlin: Mouton-de Gruyter.