

BAAL Book Prize 2001

The BAAL BOOK PRIZE 2001 was awarded at the Reading Annual Meeting to:

Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine

Vanishing Voices: The extinction of the world's languages
Oxford University Press

The three other shortlisted titles were:

Jennifer Jenkins, *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford University Press

Penelope Eckert

Linguistic Variation as Social Practice
Blackwell Publishers

Eva Gregory and Ann Williams

City Literacies: Learning to read across generations and cultures
Routledge

Selected comments from the reviewers' reports

Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine. *Vanishing Voices: The extinction of the world's languages* (Oxford University Press)

Having said all this it needs to be stated that the central concern of the volume, beyond those elaborated above, is to explicate a tie between levels of linguistic density and the prospects of biological diversity in the same settings. This 'eco-linguistic' connection is immensely challenging and, I suspect, beyond empirical demonstration. The correlation between natural species diversity and linguistic diversity is convincingly shown.

Nettle and Romaine have gathered in this single volume an impressive collection of threatened language situations across the globe and these are skilfully presented so as to appeal to a variety of readers (linguist and non-linguist alike). The approach is an interdisciplinary one - crucial in the area of language endangerment where anthropological detail, as the authors demonstrate, is vital in determining the factors that precipitate language death and the extent to which particular ethnolinguistic groups will eventually shift from their L1.

Central to the core issues of the monograph is the authors' proposal that there is a correlation between linguistic diversity and biodiversity. This hypothesis leads them to the innovative conclusion that amelioration of language extinction is similar to that of biological species facing the same fate ... While educational programmes and lexicographical efforts can be an important means of R(eversing) (L)anguage (S)hift (Fishman 1991; 2000), a neglected and possibly more beneficial strategy is to focus our efforts on preserving the habitats and cultural milieu of their speakers.

Another significant theme of *Vanishing Voices* is to dispel the various myths which surround speakers of minority languages and the negative attitudes that have been projected onto them in the past. Nettle's and Romaine's own extensive fieldwork experiences in Africa, the UK, and the Pacific are used to great advantage here in undermining widely-held views that such linguistic systems are primitive and, as such, unfit for the burden that full participation in a modern social environment would place upon them.

Nettle and Romaine ... addresses a topic both of immediate applied linguistic significance and therefore in turn of considerable interest to BAAL as an association and its members, but also a topic that can be predicted to retain central importance in applied language studies for a considerable period. For these reasons the relative accessibility of the text is a major plus as are the wide array of issues that are canvassed in the volume.

Nettle and Romaine contains illuminating and 'humanising' profiles of individuals and communities who have struggled to defend and save distinctive languages and their concomitant World Views. These add a truly world covering range of instantiations of the general case that is analysed. I recommend the book very highly considering it to be a major and immensely valuable instalment in this complex but very important field of applied linguistic scholarship and public policy intervention.

Jennifer Jenkins. *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (Oxford University Press)

The book is a well written, cogently argued, call for a re-evaluation of pronunciation targets in the teaching of English as an international language, based on data from non-native speakers of the language communicating with each other in it. English no longer belongs to the English; it is a lingua franca throughout the world, and the number of non-native speakers who use it has now firmly overtaken the number of native speakers. There appears to be no compelling reason why a Brazilian negotiating with a Swede, for instance, has to pronounce the language with the accuracy of a native speaker, when intelligibility is the main demand.

The English phonological system is subjected to review in the light of successful communication between non-native speakers ("interlanguage talk"), and new targets are posited. Incidentally, the data reveals the relatively high significance of pronunciation for successful spoken communication: phonological problems accounted for no less than 70% of communication breakdowns, lexical problems 20%, and grammatical problems merely 2.5%.

Jenkins argues her case powerfully in a final controversial chapter. Any scholar interested in the future shape of English around the world must read this book.

Penelope Eckert. *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice* (Blackwell Publishers)

Fascinating in its detail, well argued and exemplified throughout, it offers us a mature, insightful, and even compassionate methodology through which to examine language use in social groups.

It is exemplary both in method and in the novelty and interest of its findings. Quite simply, in my view, it shows us what is best in current sociolinguistics: using highly informed theory to illuminate behaviours that are fascinating not just to academics.

This book makes an immensely important contribution to the study of linguistic variation. The ethnography of communication approach underpinning this study of linguistic (and other symbolic) variation of high school students in a location near Detroit has yielded rich dividends in terms of theoretical and empirical insights.

The fundamental commitment to the idea that choices of linguistic (and other symbolic) styles are part of individual speakers' everyday meaning making and identity construction makes it possible to understand linguistic variation not just as some form of 'social fact' associated with macro-socio-cultural and/or geographic factors such as family, social class, gender and regions in a pre-ordained way. By treating variation as part of the social process of constructing and representing the self in a specific place and time, it opens up a way of connecting speakers' linguistic choices with the institutional and the cultural (group) practices.

Eva Gregory and Ann Williams. *City Literacies: Learning to read across generations and cultures* (Routledge)

This is a broad ranging book, very much in the tradition of Heath's *Ways with Words* and Barton & Hamilton's *Local Literacies*. Using a methodology derived from social history, oral history ethnography of communication, conversational analysis, the sociolinguistics of bilingualism and the new literacy studies, the book builds up a mosaic of settlement

and adaption to new contexts in the Spitalfields area of East London and a rich documentation of literacy practices over time. The time span of the book is roughly a hundred years and encompasses the successive Jewish and Bengali migrations into the area.

The presentation of the book is particularly to be commended, very much in line with the Routledge house style of a generous easy to handle volume. The photographs provide a visual documentation that is particularly valuable. With regards to readership, my sense is that this book will crack the difficult to achieve goal of being accessible to wider audiences (I imagine it to be of interest to teachers, social historians as well as the general public) while maintaining its theoretical interest to the specialist.

This is a book hard to find fault with, as likely to be of interest to the social historian as much as to the applied linguist.

It is an important and very timely book. It discusses the kinds of literacy to be found in two contrasting areas of East London -- Spitalfields and the City -- during the twentieth century, based round the testimony of several generations of informants. The inhabitants of these areas were (and are) largely economically poor, but the authors identify their cultural richness, where the "official" ways of the class-room are complemented by community-specific practices (eg. classical Hebrew, Bengali etc.).

However, the book is not simply a celebration; it also has implications for educational policy. The key point here is that there is no "one way" of developing literacy. Children can be guided to successful literacy in all sorts of ways, whether they speak English at home or not, whether they have "reading" parents or not. Talmudic and Quranic classes can have as much significance for literacy as learning at school.

This book has very important implications for sociologists, educationists and policy-makers -- indeed, for anyone interested in the inculcation and uses of literacy. I strongly recommend it.