Matthias Brenzinger, you are a linguist with extensive experience in academia, in international fora and, above all, in field work on languages spoken by marginalized communities.

In your work, empowering community and enriching scholarship go hand in hand. One of your latest undertakings has focused on Nǀuu, a non-Bantu click language. Today, Nǀuu has only three speakers, all sisters living in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa, near Upington.

When did you meet the last Nǀuu speakers first and how did they react to linguists’ interest in their language?

In the beginning of 2012 I joined Linguistics at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and my first trip one week later took me to the Northern Cape to visit the few remaining speakers of Nǀuu. This is the heritage language of members of the ǂKhomani who all speak Afrikaans as their mother tongue. In the 1970s linguists considered Nǀuu to be extinct and this was widely accepted until the late 1990s, when some 20 speakers made their language competence in Nǀuu public. Katrina Esau, alias Ouma Geelmeid, was one of them and today she is the last speaker of Nǀuu who actively teaches her language to children and adults.

Ouma Geelmeid asked me to produce teaching materials to support her teaching of her heritage language. In 2012, I founded CALDi, the Centre for African Linguistic Diversity at UCT and Sheena Shah joined CALDi as a post-doctoral research fellow one year later.
For three years we travelled numerous times to Upington to document the Nǀuu language and together with Ouma Geelmeid also produce teaching materials.

We invite our readers to check the Nǀuu reader produced by you and your team. As you say in your introduction, Nǀuu is characterised by one of the largest speech sound inventories in the world, with 114 speech sounds.

Over the last 20 years, several linguists had studied different aspects of Nǀuu. We used these work in our consultations with Katrina and established a practical Nǀuu orthography for the community. The Nǀuu language is characterised by an exceptional rich phoneme inventory, with 45 clicks, 30 non-click consonants, and 39 vowels. One of the striking phonetic features of the language is the set of bilabial clicks, sometimes referred to as “kiss clicks”. We printed alphabet charts of the practical orthography which have been used in Nǀuu teaching efforts since then.

Ouma Geelmeid, the youngest sister, is the only speaker teaching the language. Does she insist on any particular element of her language, or of its mode of communication, while making such an extreme (and lonely) gesture of transmission?

Katrina is a wonderful person; she is liked by everyone and not lonely at all. There is an active school board in place and Ouma Geelmeid’s Nǀuu classes are recognised as being of central importance for the community by all ǂKhomani.

“Research on African languages by African linguists and local language experts will open new dimensions in our understanding of these languages”
In 2012 you founded CALDI at the University of Cape Town. Its aim is to foster the sustainability of linguistic diversity on the continent, supporting the communities that most need it, promoting training for local linguists. From your perspective, what is most needed to achieve these goals and who could help to do so?

Our activities at CALDi aim at establishing “African Linguistics”, which to me means the study of African languages by African scholars on the African continent. Most linguists studying African languages are from outside the continent. It is high time for African scholars to take over from us foreigners. Research on African languages by African linguists and local language experts will open new dimensions in our understanding of these languages.

Is the Linguistics which is taught and produced at universities in the Global South sensitive to the local experience of surrounding languages, or does it mirror Anglo-American Linguistics and their linguistic representations?

African languages, in fact spoken languages in general, had been ignored in linguistic theories for a long time. This has changed and language data of natural conversations gathered in the field and language documentation is now the base of most studies in
linguistics. Researchers on African languages never followed the general trend in linguistics and always maintained their focus on collecting data of spoken languages. Thus, while many theories have ignored the languages spoken in the Global South, we have extensive studies of many of these languages. In our linguistics seminars at UCT we all employ these studies and use African languages as examples as much as possible. The scholarly frameworks and the academic discourses still follow widely within the globally dominant traditions. However, the call for decolonization of the curricula has become more pressing over the past years and will trigger a change in these respects. The intellectualisation of African languages demanded by Neville Alexander, Ruth Finlayson, Russel Kaschula and other scholars is crucial in approaching the emancipation of linguistics (and scholarship more generally) on the African continent. In April this year, Hleze Kunju graduated with the first PhD thesis submitted in isiXhosa at Rhodes University, South Africa, a big step in the right direction.

Moving on to another part of the world you lived and worked in. It has almost become a cliché that Japan is a monolingual country and that Japanese is an isolated language. However, the Ryukyuan languages- members of the Japonic language family - are in fact distinct languages and bear witness to a different situation. The inclusion of these languages in the online version of UNESCO ‘Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger’ in 2009, triggered an important discussion within Japan and a rethinking especially among the younger generation of Japanese linguists. What is the current situation of these languages and their speakers?

At least six distinct languages are still spoken on the Ryukyu Islands, namely Amami, Kunigami, Uchinaa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni, but they all are rapidly losing their mostly elderly speakers. The younger generation has shifted to Standard Japanese and among them, and only some linguistic features from Ryukyuan heritage languages survive in regional variations of Japanese, such as in Uchinaa-yamatoguchi on Okinawa Island or in Tonfutsugo in Amami (see the work of Patrick Heinrich). There is little hope for most of them to survive as spoken languages, but with more research and the production of modern grammars, at least their documentation seems to progress.
You were also involved in the inclusion of Jejueo as an endangered language in the UNESCO ‘Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger’. Jejueo is spoken on Jeju Island of South Korea, another country which declared itself as being monolingual. What is the situation and prospects of Jejueo?

Jejueo was spoken by all islanders of Jeju before 1910 and today it is at the brink of disappearance. More recent studies show that the figures of 5,000 to 10,000 Jejueo speakers provided in the UNESCO atlas (by me) seem to be far too optimistic. Fully competent Jejueo speakers are all above 70 years and the young generation on Jeju Island speaks standard Korean with some interference from Jejueo. Linguists at the Jeju National University and associated researchers have been conducting linguistic fieldwork on Jejueo for several decades and produced significant language resources, such as Jejueo-Korean dictionaries and grammatical sketches. Prompted from outsiders of the community for many decades, a low self-esteem among Jejueo speakers as well as a rather negative attitude towards their language and culture resulted in the abandoning of this heritage language by their speakers. National and provincial language policies have changed in more recent years and are now - even though still reluctantly - in favour of language revitalisation efforts. Language maintenance strategies need obviously the active involvement and dedication also of the young generation in order to be successful. Up to now however, younger islanders are reluctant to invest time for acquiring their vanishing heritage language.

In these cases, we observe how nation-state language ideologies, such as in Japan, Korea, but also in most European countries, are detrimental of autochthonous language diversity. The post-Apartheid constitution of South Africa - your home country for the last 5 years – in sharp contrast not only accepts multilingualism, but recognises 11 official languages. You are though somewhat reluctant– as you expressed in our recent symposium in Barcelona –to consider such official recognition as being key to stories of diversity success. Could we say that linguistic diversity as a de facto phenomenon is not easy “to tame” through official legal/planned policies and programmes?

The South African constitution of 1996 recognises 11 official languages on an equal level, without asserting a special status to English or to any other among the 10 languages. The
constitution respects language diversity and for that reason deserves to be saluted as a powerful proclamation of the recognition of the African majority languages in the country. After 20 years, however, the large number of official languages has proven to be a stumbling block for the development of meaningful language policies and their implementation. Legal provisions and language policies had little effects on the actual use of languages in official spheres other than for English. In fact, English is now the dominant language in all public domains throughout the country. African languages are the key for the improvement of the still very poor living conditions of the black majorities. They however have not received the attention by the government that would be required to make a difference for a better future of their speakers.

You have just been distinguished with the Linguapax Award for 2017, so far the only award in the world dedicated to acknowledging the efforts of outstanding contributors to the field of linguistic diversity. As you know, back in 2007 it was awarded to Neville Alexander, a close friend of yours—a key figure in the multilingual post-Apartheid South Africa. We still miss him, in our Linguapax meetings, insisting on the two key concepts we want to recall here with you:
The first was what he called “the multilingual habitus”. Ideally an attitude to be embodied by all speakers. Could this ideal be the key to counteract threats to linguistic diversity, such as those outlined for Japan and South Africa?

In my presentation at the symposium in Barcelona, I followed Neville Alexander’s arguments in stating that the focus in South Africa should not be on singled-out individual African languages, but on the establishment of multilingual language use patterns. This is the only way to build up a strong non-English counter-hegemony. Instead of uplifting and supporting selected, individual African languages by providing them an official status, a legal framework should rather aim at fostering multilingualism as a practice of communication among all citizens. One of Neville’s suggestions in this respect was - since the Nguni languages and Sotho languages are closely related – the languages within each of the two groupings should be used in alternation for official communication. This would be an important measure in the establishment of multilingual practices in the country.

The second mantra Neville enjoyed was, “if you don’t have a plan, you are invariably carrying out someone else’s plan”. He was referring to policy-making, to the much-needed cooperation of language policy with other social domains. What does this mean for current South Africa?

You are probably aware of the ongoing discourse on decolonization that addresses some of the issues Neville Alexander has in mind, when he talks about carrying out the plans of others. Africa and Africans have to develop own solutions for solving problems and for building up African nations. African languages, as mentioned above, play an important role in developing such plans for a better future of the majorities on the continent.

“Research on other languages requires us to be ready for unexpected thoughts which might challenge our own ways of thinking”
You were driven to languages by your curiosity for human beings and their relationship to their environments. What research-action itinerary would the young explorer called Matthias Brenzinger dream of today?

I followed my visions and always tried to realise my dreams. Since we all live in our times, I can’t think of myself as being someone else. For that reason, my dreams are of a 60 year old explorer, and they are reflected in what I am currently engaging in, in my academic as well as my private life.

Bearing in mind the plural perspectives on language you are aware of, what would be your suggestions to students pursuing fieldwork in environments such as ‘Western’ multilingual cities? And in the digital environment?

Modern technology and data management software can process large corpora of language data. While these rich data bases provide a much better ground for understanding the complex nature of communication in our divers world of today, the key to achieving new insights remains the same, it is asking the right and meaningful questions.

You have been in contact with many different language ideologies, many different approaches to communication and to what we call ‘language’. In a nutshell, what have you learned here that you find useful to remind Western academia of?

I am always interested in the concepts underlying notions in languages. When dealing with non-Western languages, I was often trapped by employing and enforcing my western ways of seeing and understanding the world. It is not easy but we have to constantly remind ourselves that very different concepts exist. Research on other languages requires us to be ready for unexpected thoughts which might challenge our own ways of thinking.

What should be today the priority role of organisations based in Europe that are devoted to raising awareness of language diversity and endangerment? What should be, in your view, our key message in order to have some impact on the preservation and continuation of language diversity?
Engaging with communities and listening and addressing their concerns were not very common when I started field work on African languages more than 35 years ago. Luckily ethical research became common practice in more recent years. For the future, the training and empowering of speakers must be prioritized in academia as well as the support of community language maintenance efforts.

From time to time we witness feats achieved in the domain of endangered language diversity. The Hawaiian case, with his hero Harry Kimura, is one of the examples you often relate to. At the University of Hawai‘i it is now possible to complete a PhD degree in Hawaiian without the use of English.

Yes, this is an incredible achievement in this English dominated US state Hawai‘i. Not only the PhD thesis can be submitted in Hawaiian, but also the defense can be conducted in Hawaiian, and even the department administration in the Hawaiian department runs entirely in Hawaiian. This all happened in 2010 for the first time in history. Strong dedication, good planning and efficient implementation by a small group of language enthusiast over more than 35 years have led to the revival of Hawaiian, an almost extinct language before that.
You have written that your interest in languages was initially, “driven by the desire to understand the thoughts of the people [you] encountered from all these different cultures”. We can read, for example, one of your articles dealing directly with meaning, human life and words: “Blood Becomes Money: Lexical Acculturation in Southern Africa” (2013). In that article you explain the story by which two meanings, ‘blood’ and ‘money’, have come to join in the speakers’ (of some southern African languages) minds and words. It’s not one of those classical examples of categorization that makes us romanticize ‘exotic languages’ and their essential world visions, rather it shows us how some of those categories are born out of language contact and semantic contagion.

In historical linguistic research, language contact phenomena have often been treated as negative impacts on languages and as obstacles for the reconstruction of the ‘real’, namely genetic relationship of languages. Today, most linguists accept that language contact and subsequent convergence of genetically unrelated languages are the norm. Contact among speakers of different languages is in some cases the main force for language change and results in mixed or hybrid languages. Language contact not only alters the lexicon and grammar, but also underlying concepts spread to other languages. Those concepts which do not conform to global norms are in fact the most vulnerable aspects of linguistic diversity.

In order to describe a language it is crucial to understand the underlying conceptual structures, those which are strongly dependent on natural and cultural environments. It is equally important, dare we say, to be immersed in that environment, willing to live through the eyes of that language, and even through the local communication ethos. In your personal account, How I Became a Linguist, you say that, as a teenager, you felt, “alien in your hometown, in your home-landscapes and [grew] up with an urge to escape”.

So, from your unique perspective and experience –rooted in that youthful urge for alternative environments and in the variety of languages and cultures you experienced thereafter – to what extent, would you say today, does an additional language, “give us an additional soul”, as is traditionally said – or in contemporary terms, augments our reality?
Sharing the daily lives and thoughts with people often challenges our ways of thinking in our limited horizons. Through other languages we are able to open up to new thoughts and views on the world and our own life. This allows us an outside view on ourselves and on what we do and most importantly to question if it makes sense what we do in a wider context. Living in Japan definitely had a definitely a major impact on how I see and engage with the world around me.

Expanding on the previous question: In, How I Became a Linguist, you said, “I enjoy being in remote places in mountain regions, in semi-desert regions or in the deep bush. I have often spent many months in settlements without electricity and limited water supply.” And after that you always return your linguistic descriptions to Universities, transforming them into academic texts, UNESCO reports, and enthusiastic talks to students sitting in class.

Besides all that output, one is left with the impression that much more knowledge was acquired in the process of living through other languages in their own environments: Sharing the lives of people (consultants, friends) whose communities are, for the most part (as you mention), on the periphery of mainstream economy and society. A kind of knowledge and insight into the human condition that could surely be most valuable for areas beyond Linguistics, and potentially shared in other academic and cultural fields.
Would you like to share with us some thoughts or suggestions along these lines?

Hiking in mountainous highlands or hot sand fields of deserts are not only tiresome, wonderful experiences but also help to understand the daily lives and thoughts of the people who live in these environments. I initiated health care programmes in Namibia and got involved in the implementation of mother tongue education in Ethiopia. These were my responses to speakers’ demands, who I worked with. Some of these engagements go beyond what most linguists would consider as being their task. For me the main question I always ask before I support or initiate such activities is if and what I can contribute as a linguist.

Do you have an upcoming project that you would like to mention to us?

Together with Sheena Shah, who is now at SOAS, London, I started to work on siPhuthi, a highly endangered Bantu language spoken mainly in the south-eastern part of Lesotho. This April, we made our second trip to the Daliwe river valley, where most siPhuthi speakers live. It felt like returning home when the people in the villages welcomed us as friends. The documentation of this language as well as the support of community language maintenance activities is a new, wonderful challenge.

In what language do you talk to your Language Rescue Car?

Since she is Japanese, I use the few Japanese phrases I know and this seems to work out well. After more than 5 years, we are both still happy and
excited when we respond to emergency calls from language communities.

Thank You

The Linguapax Award ceremony will take place on 23 November 2017, at a public event in the city of Barcelona, as part of the Linguapax-30 years celebration.

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