

Finally, come Aug 25, I had to re-enter my professional life at the university. Again, positive changes have occurred in my absence. The onetime Gay-Straight Alliance has grown into a large, active student organization. They've even secured university funding and space for a Pride Center. A very active new staff member has also started a faculty/staff LGBT group on campus, although they meet on an evening when I'm teaching so I don't know how that is going. But again, as with the rest of my re-entry experience, no doubt if I could attend, I'd still be wistful for the huge LGBT gatherings I attended during the course of my year away.

And that, as all of you who have left your culture of origin and then returned again know, is the heart of re-entry shock. It's the disorientation of not knowing the standards against which your fellow citizens, neighbors, friends, and colleagues base their experiences. It's the longing for the norms and values, institutions and people you've come to understand, if not always appreciate, overseas. It's the lethargy, depression, anger, and moodiness of having to re-adapt to what was once familiar but has since been forgotten or even rejected. It's change. And while that is often a growthful process, it's also always a difficult one.

Please send your comments, new column ideas, or other information to Barb West at bwest@uop.edu. To sign up for the SOLGA listserv, send a message to listserv@american.edu with "subscribe solga-1" in the body of the message.

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

MARK ALLEN PETERSON AND JAMES STANLAW,
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Even as the SLA moves forward on a resolution about the need to protect endangered languages, we find such efforts castigated as "language bullying" in no less a medium than the *New York Times*. In this guest column, P Kerim Friedman examines the language of the *Times* article.

The Metaphor of "Endangered Languages"

By P Kerim Friedman (Temple U)

On May 27, David Berreby wrote in the *New York Times* that while "the metaphor of 'endangered languages' is both easy to grasp and appealing to the sense of fair play," it is politically motivated, and (even worse) unscientific. Berreby's attack on this metaphor was prompted by an article in the May 15 issue of *Nature* which statistically compared the risk of extinction for animals against that of human languages, finding human languages to be the more "endangered" of the two. While Berreby might have legitimate quarrel with the scientific basis of this study, he chose instead to write an attack on the entire enterprise of language preservation.

Berreby argues: "Language bullies who try to shame a child into learning his grandfather's lan-

guage are not morally different from the language bullies who tried to shame the grandfather into learning English." He sees language preservation as an issue of concern only to linguists: "Just as the Poultry and Egg Council wants us to eat eggs, linguists want languages to study." Moreover, Berreby is himself unconcerned about language loss. He argues that because languages are always changing, there is no threat of running out of languages, as one might run out of oil, or another natural resource. New languages, like Tok Pisin are also being formed. Moreover, dead languages can even be brought to life. He gives the example of Hebrew, which he claims "was brought back from ancient texts into daily use after 2,000 years."

Two of Berreby's claims were quickly attacked in the letters page of the *New York Times*. Leanne Hinton questioned the notion of linguists as "language bullies," writing: "The movement toward revitalization of endangered languages is a community-generated process, not a linguist-generated process. Furthermore, it is the younger generations who are in the leadership roles." And Shamira M Gelbman pointed out that Hebrew never went extinct, but was a living language which "existed as a second language alongside the various vernacular tongues spoken by Jews from ancient times through the modern era."

But it is not Berreby's factual inaccuracies that are most troublesome; rather, it is his own metaphorical hanky-panky. Berreby replaces the metaphor of languages as an "endangered species" with that of language as an endlessly renewable resource, not unlike solar power. This new metaphor obscures the issues at the heart of language endangerment. It isn't "languages" in the abstract that are in danger. The concern is with specific languages, spoken by specific groups of people. As Alice Thor Pianfetti wrote in her letter to the *Times*, Berreby "dismissed and discounted the loss of culture, tradition and ethnic pride that accompanies the death of a language."

To his credit, Berreby quotes James Crawford, who points out that language death does not happen in privileged communities, but "to the dispossessed and the disempowered, peoples who most need their cultural resources to survive." However, Berreby feels that what's done is done, and that attempts to turn back the clock are just as flawed as policies promoting linguistic unification. But why should that be? I believe that Berreby is a victim of his own metaphor. Although he gives lip service to the political nature of language decline, he ultimately treats it as an unavoidable "natural" phenomenon. We shouldn't concern ourselves, because new languages will naturally replace the old. Any interference with this natural process is bad because it is just as "political" as the past wrongs that were committed against the speakers of these languages. He fails to grasp that the process of language death only seems natural if you accept the power inequalities that cause it in the first place.

P Kerim Friedman (PhD candidate, Temple U) does research on attempts to preserve the endangered languages

of Taiwan's Aborigine population. An earlier version of this article appeared on his Web log, *Keywords*, <http://keywords.oxus.net/>.

Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to Mark Allen Peterson (petersm2@muohio.edu) or James Stanlaw (stanlaw@ilstu.edu).

Society for Medical Anthropology

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SMA Invited Sessions

Be sure to include the following SMA-sponsored invited sessions on your "must see" list for the upcoming AAA Annual Meeting.

Friday, Nov 21

8-11:45 am

Contagion and Conflict; Ronald I. Barrett, organizer.

1:45-3:30 pm

A Critical Anthropology of Human Genetic Variation Research; Sandra S Lee and Barbara A Koenig, organizers.

1:45-5:30 pm

Rethinking Global AIDS Policy; Douglas A Feldman, organizer.

Saturday, Nov 22

8-9:45 am

Embargos, Structural Adjustment and the War on the Poor; James T Pfeiffer, organizer.

SMA Special Event Panel at AAA Meeting: Work vs Family in Academia

By Kari Olson (U Iowa)

Given the changing nature of academic jobs and the nature of the American family what strategies have anthropologists working within the academy adopted to balance career demands with family responsibilities? How has gender shaped the constraints under which male and female academics have constructed their personal/professional lives and how has it influenced their choice of strategies? Which approaches have proved most successful?

This informal panel gathers speakers from diverse family and professional backgrounds to explore how academic institutional policies have either helped or hindered their attempts to meld fulfilling family lives with stimulating careers. They will offer their experiences (and advice) to others juggling academic positions and care-giving or partnership roles, giving concrete advice for dealing with diverse work and family situations. Finally, they will comment on how their family and reproductive lives have influenced their research and vice-versa, and offer observations about the ways institutions can adapt to better address the needs of faculty members and graduate students.