In this paper I analyze the rhetorical practice of “counting down” last speakers of endangered languages as those speakers age and eventually pass away. In recent media attention on language obsolescence, a popular narrative convention is to announce the death of “one of the last speakers” of an endangered language. Drawing on fieldwork in a Cucapá settlement in the Colorado River Delta of northern Mexico, I examine the effect of enumerating language speakers in the context of the death of a prominent elder and fisherwoman. I show how for some Cucapá people at the center of this “countdown,” the technique has induced an enumerative malaise, or an exasperation with these measurement practices.

1. Introduction

There is a legend about Alexander von Humboldt, the 18th century German explorer and geographer. It chronicles his encounter with the “last speaker” of the language of the Atures, an indigenous group in Venezuela that was by then considered to be largely “extinct.” As the story goes, when von Humboldt reached the old Atures village of Maypures he was led by torchlight to the last speaker of the language who was, as it turned out, in a cage. Because the last speaker was, in fact, a talking parrot, captured long ago by the Atures people. As Mark Abley wrote in his 2003 best seller on endangered languages: “Amid the shadows of the huts in Maypures, von Humboldt was shown a talking parrot…The Atures language had died out among humans. It was last heard coming from a bird’s beak” (200).

While von Humboldt’s encounter with this particular last speaker took place in the 18th century, the motif of the “last speaker” of an endangered language has become popular much more recently. In contemporary media coverage and popular writing about language endangerment, a common narrative convention is to enumerate the last speakers of a dying language. For example, in *Nettle and Romaine’s Vanishing Voices* (2000) the authors begin the book by listing the deaths of a series of last speakers: the last known speaker of the Manx language died on the Isle of Man in 1974, the last speaker of Cupéño died in California in 1987 and the last speaker of Ubyk died in Turkey 1992. The fact that many endangered languages in the world are now spoken by their “last speakers” has increasingly become a call to action in efforts to document these languages.

In this paper I analyze the rhetorical practice of “counting down” last speakers of endangered languages as those speakers age and eventually pass away. I draw on fieldwork in a Cucapá settlement in the Colorado Delta of northern Mexico, in order to examine the effect of enumerating language speakers. I will examine the way that a particular conception of the “unitary speaker” emerges in this context, by analyzing particular problems that emerged with counting speakers in this site as well as the way the rhetorical tactic has played out in the growing literature on language endangerment. This paper is part of a larger project which examines how a range of phenomena in the delta have been enumerated, including water, animal...
species and language and how, for some Cucapá people at the center of this “countdown,” the technique has induced an enumerative malaise, or an exasperation with these measurement practices. In this article, I will focus specifically on the way language has been targeted as one of these domains.

While maps still show the Colorado River running from the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of California, in recent years the river has not reached the sea. The Cucapá settlement of El Mayor is located in the Colorado River Delta, a region ravaged by water scarcity, with a fishing economy now buckling under the strain of water shortages and environmental restrictions. As a result of the 1944 water treaty between the United States and Mexico, ninety percent of the water in the Colorado is diverted before it reaches the border. The remaining ten percent is increasingly being directed to the manufacturing industry in Tijuana and Mexicali and the river no longer reaches the Cucapá settlement. The impact of water scarcity on the Colorado Delta’s ecosystem has left local residents with greatly reduced means of subsistence (Alvarez de Williams, 1987; Sánchez, 2000).

Additionally, in 1993 the Mexican federal government created an ecological reserve in the only part of the Cucapá traditional fishing grounds which was still viable, right at the mouth of the river, where some groundwater still meets the sea. This reserve effectively criminalizes fishing in the area. As most residents struggle to feed their families, some fishermen have fervently protested fishing bans. Others have forfeited their fishing rights and have found work in the narco-sector or as farm-hands or in the factories. In the past several years, the political and economic situation has escalated in a series of protests and confrontations between local fishermen and federal officials (Navarro Smith, 2008; Navarro Smith et al., 2010). However, the fishing crisis in the delta, and the water crisis more generally, have yet to be resolved.

These ecological and economic changes have also coincided with a series of more cultural changes in the community, including a shift from the indigenous language of Cucapá to Spanish. In this sense, this group’s sociolinguistic situation mirrors that of many indigenous people around the world who are shifting to the economically and culturally dominant languages of their regions (Harrison, 2007; Hill, 1983; Kulick, 1992; Mufwene, 2001; Mühlhäusler, 1996; Nettle and Romaine, 2000). The Cucapá language has already reached a stage of advanced obsolescence in this community, where younger generations are not learning to speak the language.

2. The countdown

It is in the context of this environmental and social crisis that the Cucapá peoples’ “endangered” habitat, culture and language are increasingly being represented by scientists, NGO workers and state officials through numbers: the statistical measurement of people, birds, fish, water quantities and language speakers. As one Cucapá elder named Esperanza1 put it: “Outsiders are always coming in to count something.” And what is counted is usually something at risk of disappearing.

Indeed, there has been a growing trend among both local and foreign scientists and bureaucrats to enumerate different aspects of the local landscape in myriad ways. Scores of scientists have congregated in the delta counting birds and fish; linguists count the few indigenous language speakers left in El Mayor and the surrounding communities; water engineers measure the acre-feet of water that trickles past the border; and public health officials measure fecal count and mercury content in the water.

There has been a recent surge of work in anthropology on the role of statistics and measurements as a mode of governmentality (Guyer et al., 2010; Hill, 2002; Inda, 2006; Lee, 2007; Urla, 1993; Urton and Llanos, 1997). The use of numbers as a technology of power has been the defining focus of this literature. The census, in particular, has received significant scholarly attention as an enumerative project, which has profound consequences for both national and individual identity making (Anderson, 1991 [1983]; Cohn, 1987, 1996; Garrett, 2010; Skrabut, 2010; Starr, 1987).

While numbers have often been used as a tool of state power, in the last several centuries enumeration has also emerged as a central feature of scientific practice in the production of knowledge and truth. The mathematical function tends to abstract difference into similitude, permitting a generalized abstraction across otherwise incommensurable domains (Maurer, 2005). In this context, numbers have played a powerful role, functioning as pure description or, as Bourdieu put it, as a science “without a scientist” (1990, p. 168). Historians argue that the most distinct shift towards this elevation of the number in scientific and bureaucratic practices began in the early 19th century, when there was a move from episodic measurements toward a routine monitoring of society and a broadening of interest in statistics (Hacking, 1986, p. 222). Ian Hacking referred to this statistical onslaught as the “avalanche of numbers” to describe the origin of statistics and the endeavor to chart and control populations in terms of health, criminality, births, deaths, marriages and other such measures. This “age of statistics” (Urla, 1993) was also characterized by an emergence of faith in statistical measurement as the basis for an objective and necessary science of society.

Hacking (1990) points out that most of the fascination with enumeration that began at the turn of the 19th century was specifically focused on deviance: suicide, crime, madness, prostitution and disease. The normalizing function of numbers to manage what would otherwise appear as unpredictable and chaotic has been a central theme in this work. The idea was that through the practices of enumeration and classification, deviant subpopulations could be identified for improvement and control (Hacking, 1990, p. 3).

1 Esperanza is a pseudonym as are all names in the ethnographic descriptions in this article. The fieldwork on which I base this analysis took place primarily in 2005–2006 as well as in subsequent fieldwork periods in 2007, 2010 and 2011.
In the case that I am going to describe here, one might argue that, in its focus on decline, an enumeration of last speakers represents the ultimate form of deviance: impending extinction. It is the perceived cultural endangerment of language speakers that is being highlighted and purportedly “managed” by this counting practice. This endangerment is highlighted by the sense of the finite achieved by enumerations, and it is managed by the concomitant set of controls that, as I will describe in what follows, serve to delineate what constitutes “authentic” indigeneity. But it is not just the fact that the specter of extinction has consistently been raised through the idiom of numbers that is noteworthy about this case. It is that these numbers themselves have taken a very specific form – that of a “countdown.”

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “countdown” as “The action of counting in reverse, from a given number to zero, usually in seconds, to mark the lapse of time before an explosion, the launching of a missile, or the like; also, the period of time preceding such an event or the procedures carried out in that time.” A countdown is a numerical trope, which in the context of endangerment is distinctly qualified for the representation of decline and extinction. A countdown implies that when one reaches “zero” there is no going back.

3. Last speakers

The act of counting always assumes that the entities being enumerated are in fact identifiable as units that can be individuated in the first place. But, in fact, the idea of the “unitary speaker” has been problematized in a variety of respects in linguistic anthropology. Because historically, linguistic anthropology has been concerned with showing that language is an inherently social rather than individual phenomenon, much of the work in the discipline has at least implicitly critiqued the enlightenment view of language as an expression of individual identity and autonomy and rather, viewed language as being, in fact, constitutive of social relationships (Agha, 2007; Hastings and Manning, 2004).

Indeed, what has distinguished linguistic anthropology from other approaches to language has been a focus on linguistic performance and situated discourse. Rather than view language as an abstract, pure system of rules reproduced by an “ideal speaker,” as it is represented by formal grammarians and structural linguists, linguistic anthropology has focused on how language is both a product and resource for social interaction (Bauman and Briggs, 2003). It is precisely this reformulation of language as existing beyond the individual speaker and the characterization of language as a practice among language communities embedded in wider social contexts that has differentiated the discipline from other approaches to language.

For the purpose of this argument, however, I would like to selectively draw attention to a few theorists who have interrogated the idea of the unitary speaker in ways that are particularly relevant to this case. For example, Goffman (1979) famously problematized the idea of the unitary speaker by suggesting that the entity that we crudely refer to as a speaker is really composed of a number of discrete agents that may or may not coincide. There is the “author” who actually utters the words, the “author” who selects and combines the words and finally the “principal” whose position the words express. All three roles may be played by someone at the same time, but often they are not. Goffman’s deconstruction of the role of the speaker challenges the fundamental countability of speakers (Goffman, 1979).

In observing that reported speech is an intrinsic feature of the way we interact, Goffman was echoing Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) underscored that contention that all language is inherently multiple. This notion of dialogicity is particularly relevant for the issue of counting speakers because it highlights the fact that every utterance exists in response to things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said after. This draws attention to the impossibility of a “first speaker” since every speaker is, in effect, a subsequent speaker. In Bakhtin’s account, God could be the only first speaker.

In this article, in contrast, it is the idea of the “last speaker” that I am interested in – and in a much more specific context. The rhetorical practice of “counting down” the last speakers of obsolescent languages has been a persistent feature of discussions on language endangerment since the issue became popular in the 1990s. For example, Harrison (2007) wrote in his recent book on language endangerment: “The last speakers of probably half of the world’s languages are alive today. As they grow old and die, their voices will fall silent” (3). The trope surfaced, for example, in international media over the announcement of the death of the last speaker of Eyak, an Alaskan language, in January of 2008. USA Today printed a story with a headline that read “Last Speaker of Eyak Dead at 89” (Pemberton, 2008). The article chronicled the passing of Marie Smith Jones, the last speaker of the language, dying in her home in Anchorage. Several other news sources, including the BBC, CBC and The Guardian, reported the event with a similar slant.

More recently, there has been a flurry of media attention over the two last speakers of the Ayapaneco language in Mexico. In this case public intrigue has focused around the fact that while there are just two people left who can speak the language fluently – they refuse to talk to each other. 75-year-old Manuel Segovia, and 69-year-old Isidro Velazquez live 500 m apart in the village of Ayapa in the southern state of Tabasco (Tuckman, 2011). However, in what some observers have pointed out is the “Hollywood twist” of this particular last speaker scenario, the two “grumpy old men” refuse to communicate even for the sake of their language’s survival.2

It is hard to avoid the impression that there is a certain pleasure with this spectacle of extinction, or at the least a powerful anticipation. The enumeration of last speakers and the countdown of their deaths in scenarios such as these has also

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2 See the blog entry on neatorama.com: “The Last Two Speakers of a Dying Language Aren’t Talking To Each Other” (url: http://www.neatorama.com/tag/ayapaneco/).
been a very effective rhetorical tactic. The idea that with one person's death an entire history dies and an entire system of classification and body of knowledge is lost highlights the urgency of many language endangerment situations at this particular moment in history. The deaths of these individuals represent the way many minority languages teeter on a historical precipice.

Of course, in some cases language survival is more complex than this discourse would presume. The Manx language, which is a member of the Celtic language family, is a good example of this. As Nettle and Romaine (2000) chronicled in their last speaker enumeration that I mentioned above, the last speaker of Manx died in 1974, with the passing of Edward Maddrell. Since Maddrell’s death, however, there has been a revival of the language. In fact, Manx has been formally taught in schools since 1992. And in the 2001 census, 1689 people claimed to be able to speak, read or write the language. While cases of language revival (the Hebrew language being the most famous [Fellman, 1973; Fishman, 1991]) are more rare than cases in which languages fall out of use, these examples nonetheless underscore the fact that languages are systems that presuppose any one utterance by any one individual.3

Despite these more abstract considerations about the issues of individuating language speakers, one might argue that there is still something deeply commonsensical about counting speakers. You can still meaningfully identify who is and is not a speaker, in most cases, and thus “count speakers” in socially meaningful ways in a large range of settings. However, counting last speakers, especially as they die, also presents a set of specific practical problems.

For example, let’s return to von Humboldt’s parrot, which Abley (2003) used as an example of a quintessential last speaker. The idea that a bird could be the last “speaker” of a language brings to the fore a set of questions about how the category of “speaker” is defined within this paradigm. Certainly, a parrot that can recite a limited vocabulary of words does not qualify by most linguists’ criteria to have a full-fledged language capacity (the bird lacks syntax, the capacity for recursion and many of the other design features considered to be universal to human language [Hockett, 1977]). As Goffman would point out, the parrot can only ever be an animator, never the principal or author of its own utterances.4 However, in the case of the majority of so called “last speakers” of dying languages it is often common that they only remember a few words and are more accurately categorized as “semi-speakers” (Dorian, 1977; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1995).

There is a set of more specific difficulties with defining what constitutes a “speaker” in the case of advanced language obsolescence. The problem of how to define and count “speakers” revolves around whether someone is a first-language speaker or a second-language speaker, fluent or semi-fluent and of course whether they identify as a speaker in the first place (Dorian, 1977; Elmendorf, 1981; Urala, 1993). For example, Urala (1993) analyzes the use of language surveys in the Basque nationalist movement and shows that there were points of difference between the ways that native speakers and the census classified people. While the census differentiated between levels of competence, locals, in contrast, differentiated between different dialects (Urala, 1993, p. 830). That is, locals differentiated between those who spoke different dialects of Basque, which were in turn imbued with all sorts of perceived moral and social inequalities. They did not, however, make meaningful distinctions between those who spoke well or who had an active or passive competence. These are the kinds of problems that linguists have routinely pointed out in reference to the census and language speakers (Gal, 1993; Graham and Zentella, 2010; Leeman, 2004).

I experienced this ambiguity first hand after spending my first few months in El Mayor. One of my initial goals was to learn as much of the indigenous language as possible but because only a handful of elders were fluent in it, and in the majority of contexts they spoke Spanish, my learning of Cucapá was limited to lessons and elicitation primarily with the chief and his wife. After a few months, I had merely amassed a repertoire of stock phrases to use for greetings with the chief and built up and memorized a vocabulary.

Around this time, some representatives from a charitable foundation arrived on a tour to decide whether to fund some projects in El Mayor. At one point as Don Madeleno led the small group on a walk through the village, he gestured to me and proudly announced to the visitors that I spoke Cucapá too. While I was initially embarrassed by this exaggeration, it was clear from the context that he had not made such an inflated claim because he had a distorted sense of my capacities. I interpreted it, rather, as a way of signaling to these outsiders that other foreigners, such as myself, had seen the language as valuable, indeed, valuable enough to be worth learning.

In other contexts, the category of “Cucapá speaker” was also problematic in El Mayor. During my own interviews of residents, I would often ask whether they spoke Cucapá and who in El Mayor they could identify as speaking the language. This was a question that always required clarification. What did I mean by “speak Cucapá”? Did I mean just some words? Or whether the person spoke the language all the time at home? There were people who had a certain amount of comprehension, or passive ability, but could not or did not ever “speak.” Sometimes I would specify “con fluidez” (fluently) or that I meant people who could speak as well as they spoke Spanish. What was clear, however, was that this was not a transparent category. And it was also clear that people were very uncomfortable when asked to come up with an approximate number of “last speakers.”

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3 See also recent characterizations of languages as “sleeping,” that is, not currently spoken but fully documented and thought to be potential instances of language revitalization in the future (Hinton and Hale, 2001; Leonard, 2008).

4 For another interesting example of animals as “last speakers” see Goddard (2000) on Chief Red Thunder, whose death in 1996 marked the passing of the last speaker of Catawba. The chief was survived by his dogs, however, who the chief had taught a series of commands in Catawba.
4. Enumeration of languages

Thus far, I have been analyzing the practical and theoretical problems with counting language speakers. It is noteworthy that there is a striking parallel between this issue and a similar debate about how languages, as a whole, are counted in the literature on language endangerment. Jane Hill (2002) has argued that the enumeration of languages is a common ‘scene setting’ technique in the literature of endangered language advocacy, which presents alarming statistics about the large number of languages spoken in the world today and the small number likely to survive. Linguists may argue that there are anywhere between 3000 and 8000 distinctive languages in the world, depending on the definition of language used (Trudgill, 1991). The statistics on how many languages are at risk are equally variable and depend on what criteria are used to assess endangerment (Nettle and Romaine, 2000, p. 9). Despite this variability, the statistics most often cited are those compiled by Michael Krauss (1992), which indicate that only 10% of the approximate 6000 languages spoken today are likely to survive the next century (Hill, 2002, p. 127). As Hill points out, these statistics are quoted in virtually every book, essay and newspaper article on language endangerment and have become a central theme in media sound bites and publishers’ blurbs about language loss.

This focus on the numbers of languages endangered, much like the focus on the number of last speakers of a given language, has been successful in creating a sense of crisis around the issue. But we also encounter a parallel set of problems with the enumeration of languages as a whole. For instance, despite the routine way that such figures are cited, it is generally recognized among linguists that counting languages involves a great deal of arbitrary construction of boundaries (Haugen, 1966; Hill, 2002; Muehlmann and Duchêne, 2007; Mühlhäusler, 1996). Counting languages, like counting speakers, depends on an assumption that languages can be individuated as separate entities (Heller, 1999; Hill, 2002; Urcioli, 1996) and this misrepresents a number of characteristics of language that linguists currently recognize.

For example, the boundaries that have been drawn between languages are not based on the internal consistency or homogeneity of the languages themselves but rather the historical circumstances that allowed them to be ‘identified’, documented and standardized. Mühlhäusler (1996) describes how in many parts of the Pacific there are long chains of interrelated dialects and languages with no clear internal boundaries. He explains that despite the fact of this continuum linguists have ‘identified’ and documented languages at the center of economic and communicational activities and that these described varieties have become the languages “par excellence of this chain” (6). Mühlhäusler further argues that these were the historical circumstances that led to the standardization of certain dialect variations – that is, the homogenization and institutionalization of one variety over others. Similar linguistic situations have arisen in many other areas of the world (Graber, 2011; Holland, 1959; Patrick, 2003).

It is this process of standardizing languages that allows for certain language varieties to become marginalized and endangered in the first place. With the elevation of one language variety to a standard form, and especially the implementation of that variety in schools and other institutions, all other variations become dialectical deviations, leading to both a structural and evaluative marginalization of those varieties. And while linguists have shown great urgency about the endangerment of the world’s languages, they rarely mention endangered dialects – that is particular varieties of language whose status is threatened by other encroaching varieties of the same language. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1995) suggest that the neglect of dialects, which is in part the by-product of language standardization, is also based on the assumption that inter-language variation is of more scientific value than intra-language variation, which is in turn based on the assumption that the systematic boundaries between a language and a dialect are obvious and discrete.

Despite all of the imprecision involved in individuating and counting languages, scholars interested in language and especially language obsolescence generally tolerate and reproduce estimates about the number of languages in the world. I think this indicates that while linguists are aware of the arbitrariness of the categories of “language” and “speaker,” there is a lack of awareness about the ideological implications that the implementation of these categories may have for the language communities to which they are applied. It is a telling contrast, for example, that it would be almost unheard of at this point for an anthropologist to make a claim about how many cultures there are in the world. Decades of work critiquing views of culture as a bounded unit and emphasizing processes of hybridization would make any such claim untenable. Such objectifying claims about language and culture are related, of course, and in the following section I will explore the particular way these claims have been linked in reference to the Cucapá settlement in the Colorado Delta.

5. Adelia María Martínez

What is at stake in these debates about the enumeration of languages and speakers is not just the issue of what kind of empirical objects they are. In the countdown of language speakers and also the wider debate about languages in general, the countability issue is tightly linked to a wider ideology about the links between language and culture. The implication is that there will be that much less cultural diversity in the world when there are 3000 languages rather than 6000 and, furthermore, that when the last Cucapá speaker dies – for example – something essential about Cucapá culture, if not that culture itself, will also disappear forever. In fact, to a large extent, linguistic anthropologists have explicitly supported the notion that “when a language dies a culture dies” (Woodbury, 1993).

In my own research, these issues were highlighted when a prominent fisherwoman in the community passed away. In March of 2006, Adelia María Martínez, the mother of Cruz, the father in the house where I was staying during my fieldwork,
died at the age of 71, after a long battle with cancer. Several days after the funeral, a progressive radio show mentioned her death in a program. The host was making a point about the lack of access to medical services in indigenous communities in northern Mexico. As part of his appeal for the urgency of this situation he characterized these populations as being at the brink of extinction, and to emphasize his point he then added: “This week one of the last speakers of Cucapá passed away.”

Cruz and the others that were sitting around listening to the show were at first giddy with surprise and excitement at the mention of his mother. It was an unexpected reference that, close on the heels of her death, had a powerful emotional impact. But after a few moments of silence, Cruz went on to exclaim defensively, “She didn’t just speak Cucapá!” He looked thoughtful and then added, “She was one of the best fishers around… She could sing songs like nobody else.” He went on to tell stories about how she would sing to her children and then later her grandchildren. Cruz’ clarification that she did not just speak Cucapá but played a number of other roles that were significant to her community and family (a fisherwoman and grandmother, a mother and a singer) was an important intervention which highlights some of the issues with the “last speaker” trope.

In the context of Cruz’ mother’s death, what became apparent was that the media highlighted this aspect of her identity, that is, her ability to speak an indigenous language, in order to demonstrate to the public that her death was significant. The host’s intent was to raise support for extending medical services into this community. But the implication was that an indigenous fisherwoman who has died in a poor Mexican settlement needs an entire indigenous classification in her head alone for her death to matter. Identifying what is lost in an individual’s death by pointing out she is a “last speaker” prioritizes the “speaker” rather than the mother, the wife or the fisherwoman.

It is helpful to place Cruz’ discomfort with having his late mother enumerated as a “last speaker” in the context of a more general political climate in which indigenous language competence has come to be associated with authenticity (Duchêne and Heller, 2007; Errington, 2003; Graham, 2002; Hill, 1998; Jackson and Warren, 2005; Muehlmann, 2008). Many Cucapá people have experienced the recent state-sponsored shift to multiculturalism as an interrogation of their claims to an indigenous identity. Outsiders such as government officials and NGO workers increasingly stipulate indigenous-language capacity as a criterion for recognizing indigenous rights.

In El Mayor, the very small number of fluent speakers has led some authorities to claim that the Cucapá are no longer fully indigenous. The appeal to indigenous people to conform to a particular construction of indigeneity is part of a broader political and historical trend in which international and national law has begun to recognize the rights of indigenous people while at the same time specifying the criteria that allow for groups to qualify as indigenous in the first place. Article number 2 of the Mexican constitution recognizes that Mexico is a pluri-cultural nation, but it also defines indigenous groups as the descendants of the people that lived in the same territory at the beginning of colonization, specifying that they must preserve their own social, economic and cultural institutions. Therefore, because the Cucapá fishermen rely on the same techniques used by their non-indigenous neighbors, using motor boats, and because they speak Spanish at home, they have been unsuccessful in regaining their fishing rights as “indigenous people.”

The role of language, as a signifier of identity, contrasts to more locally salient identifications that elevate occupation over language competence or other characteristics as a signal of ethnic identity. For example, many of the more political fishermen among the Cucapá would claim that to be Cucapá is to fish in the Colorado River. This is interesting in itself, because the prominence of fishing has only recent historical precedence in this community. Early ethnographers’ and explorers’ accounts document how traditionally the Cucapá relied heavily on flood plain agriculture and hunting and gathering to supplement fishing during the 18th and 19th centuries (Kelly, 1977). But over the last few generations and especially in the context of the fishing conflict, fishing has become the primary mode of subsistence, as well as a major self-defining feature. The idea that fishing is constitutive of Cucapá identity, which is, of course, an essentialism in itself, has also been contested from within this group. For example, many people whose fishing nets have been confiscated by the government have turned to narco-trafficking as an economic alternative to fishing, which they see as a form of resistance to government policies in the borderland region. But becoming a narcotraficante (narco-trafficcker) also challenges local ideas of the Cucapá as people who will “fish forever” (as argued by some indigenous activists and environmental NGOs).

Many Cucapá youth, whose native language is in fact Spanish, criticize the notion that what makes them indigenous is speaking Cucapá. They do so by drawing on the vocabulary that has “survived” the obsolescence of the Cucapá language: swear words. Elsewhere, I analyze a set of linguistic practices in which the youth swear in Cucapá at government officials and bureaucrats when they are asked about their fluency in the language (Muehlmann, 2008). For example, an NGO worker might come in to look for people to work on an eco-tourism project and will ask a group of young people if they speak Cucapá, to which they respond, “yeah” in Spanish and then in Cucapá say, “Go screw yourself.” From the point of view of the officials, the literal meaning does not matter, and the form alone (i.e., the fact that these words “sound” indigenous) serves to legitimate the speakers as “authentically indigenous.” However, from the point of view of the Cucapá youth, the meaning of the words is extremely important because, as I argue elsewhere (ibid), it communicates their critique of the government’s assumptions about their identity by, literally, insulting them.

This example also epitomizes one of the central problematics here. After centuries of discrimination on cultural grounds and state efforts to make indigenous people adopt Spanish, resulting in a high level of assimilation, the Mexican government has now ostensibly changed its attitude toward indigenous people and now expects them to speak native languages to recognize them as authentically indigenous. The older generations in the Cucapá community still remember the punishment they were subjected to if they spoke their indigenous language in school. Speaking Cucapá has now, just decades later, become a formal and informal criterion for access to certain rights (Muehlmann, 2008, 2009).
This is not, of course, an isolated dynamic. Similar paradoxes of recognition have been identified in other ethnographic sites (Clifford, 1988; Gordillo, 2004; Povinelli, 2002). But in the context of the countdown in the Colorado Delta, the relatively recent reversal in regards to how markers of indigeneity are valued by the government helps clarify the effect of the enumerative practices that this group is now experiencing. Indeed, it is precisely now that the government wants them to act like “Indians” – just in time to count them down to their extinction.

This brings us back to that uncomfortable sense of anticipation, almost pleasure that was identifiable with the fervent media countdowns of language speakers that have become increasing prevalent in both popular and academic treatments of the subject of language obsolescence. In some ways, this sense of pleasure is reminiscent of what Rosaldo (1989) termed “imperialist nostalgia” – where people mourn the passing of what they themselves transformed or destroyed. Imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of innocent yearning both to capture peoples’ imagination and to conceal its complicity with domination.

While the countdown evokes something similar to an imperialist nostalgia, what is being mourned in this case has not yet been completely destroyed. Instead there are these last linguistic vestiges. Moore (2006) develops a parallel between the particular mixture of appreciation and melancholy that emerge in language endangerment discourses and the peculiar affective nexus that was evident among the newly rich American bourgeoisie of the 19th century, who made their fortunes from the destruction of the landscape while at the same time patronizing the art of landscape painters who devoted their lives to preserving and documenting “pristine landscapes.” Moore points out the similarities between this nostalgia and the notion of the sublime. The sublime, he argues, links back more generally to the European tradition according to which an artistic object or a landscape inspired feelings of pain and danger in its viewers who would be left “awestruck as waves of appreciation mixed with melancholy” washed over them (301: see also McElhinny, 2006).

An important tension emerges here between mourning a loss, and excitedly anticipating it. The maintenance of this tension is fundamental to the ideological effect of the countdown, which provides a consistent narrative by which destruction is immanent, in fact, unavoidable. A countdown does not stop at eight or five or four. Instead, it has a profoundly rhetorical affect; by its very nature it goes all the way down. This is why it is such a powerful enumerative narrative – because, during a countdown, you cannot help but brace yourself for the inevitable.

6. Conclusions

The point that I have tried to make so far is that part of what the Cucapá people I describe here are reacting to, through their discomfort around enumerative practices, is the role of these practices in essentializing language as an index of authenticity. When placed in this context one can imagine why locals resist attempts to be counted or discounted as a speaker of this language. It is also now evident why there is such discomfort in giving a tally of “last speakers” counted down in this way.

However, it is important to point out that the practice of counting speakers in this region fits into a more widespread set of enumerative practices in the Colorado Delta. As a result of the exploitation of the river in the United States, the Colorado River has one of the highest rates of species extinction and endangerment on the continent (Bergman, 2002). In response to the high levels of species endangerment in the delta there have been various undertakings to monitor the species in the area to ascertain the extent of the crisis. For example, the Sonoran Institute, a US based environmental NGO, has been carrying out an extensive bird monitoring initiative in the area. They have determined that two species of wintering waterbirds are endangered in the area, six threatened, and sixteen are under special protection in Mexico (Sonoran Institute, 2005). The issue of endangered fish and marine animals is also a heated topic of measurement and debate in the Colorado Delta. There are several endangered species in the area, including the vaquita porpoise, of which it is estimated that there are less than 250 left.5

Therefore, part of the problem with the practices of enumeration that are carried out in this region is that through the continuous narrative identity of the countdown, biological diversity and cultural diversity are being constructed as the same thing. It is evident how conducting a count of humans in El Mayor would have clear dehumanizing implications in the context of the fervent enumerations of animal species in the delta. An effort to count humans in the village likens their social formation and worth to the bird and animal species in the area. It also raises the same specter of endangerment, decline and immanent extinction that counting species does. This is the equivalence that numbers are famed to accomplish, a reduction to sameness (Guyer et al., 2010). This helps explain some of the ambivalent reactions I encountered when asking about how many Cucapá speakers were left in El Mayor.

The specific case of counting down last speakers has a particular resonance among the Cucapá in this area for reasons which by now should be more clear. In this case, there is an assumption, first, that the “Cucapá language speaker” is a salient identity category, easily and meaningfully delineated and, second, that this category represents an attribute that is indicative of a cultural identity. There is a clear hierarchy imposed in the invocation of the last speakers trope. Among academics and officials, the category of “Cucapá language speaker” is higher in the rankings of what would make a person Cucapá than the

5 Practices of enumeration are a widespread part of environmental management in other parts of the world as well (see, for example, Verran (2010) on water management in Australia).
category of "Spanish language speaker." This is despite the fact that the large majority of those who self-identify as Cucapá do not speak any language other than Spanish.

Cruz’ discomfort around his mother’s place in the countdown of last speakers seemed to acknowledge that the category made her more valuable on the one hand but dehumanized her on the other. What I have argued here is that the trope of the last speaker empties out the category of the “speaker” to the extent that even a parrot can meaningfully occupy this category.

Now, since only God can have the first word in Bakhtin’s account, it seems appropriate that the parrot should have the last word here. Unfortunately, as Abley (2003, p. 200) wrote, the parrot, and indeed the last speaker of the Atures language died many years ago “amid the shadows of the huts in Maypures.”

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