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Dying to be counted: the commodification of endangered languages in documentary linguistics

Lise M. Dobrin, Peter K. Austin and David Nathan

The expectation of ultimate salvation through technology... inspires an awed deference to the practitioners and their promises of deliverance while diverting attention from more urgent concerns. Thus, unrestrained technological development is allowed to proceed apace, without serious scrutiny.... From within the faith, any and all criticism appear irrelevant, and irreverent.

—David Noble, *The Religion of Technology*, p. 207

1. Introduction¹

The main way in which linguists have responded to the problem of language endangerment has been through a renewed commitment to the task of language documentation. Consequently, much of the discussion of language endangerment within linguistics has focused on the practical questions that follow from that commitment, such as: What features of a language should we record? How can we make sure what we document will be properly preserved? How can we transform what we document into something of immediate use? But much of the critical discussion that has been generated by the issue of language endangerment has taken place outside mainstream linguistics, in the related but distinct field of linguistic anthropology. There the focus has been on analyzing the essentially moral discourse that frames language endangerment as a problem worthy of attention and action. The critique of language endangerment discourse raises some issues that documentary linguists would do well to take heed of, such as how the tropes that linguists use are heard and interpreted by members of endangered language communities themselves (Hill 2002, Grenoble 2009).

¹ This paper is a revised and expanded version of Dobrin, Austin and Nathan 2007; we are grateful for feedback and comments from audiences at the Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory conference, SOAS December 2007 and the Linguistic Society of America annual meeting January 2008.

But there are also areas within documentary linguistics which could benefit from a more critical approach. In particular, we argue that the discourse of documentary *methods* is characterised by an embrace of technology as an unquestioned goal, one that in some cases hinders rather than facilitates our thinking about the problems we are trying to solve. This discourse of documentary methods is seen most clearly in applications and evaluation criteria for funding documentary research, where a selection of technological and quantitative “facts” has become a dominant theme. In this paper we try to understand, and hence begin to challenge, the social forces that lead documentary linguists to frame their work in the highly patterned ways that they do, even when these are in tension with their larger goals.

2. The legitimising discourse of language endangerment

Over the past several years, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have engaged in a vibrant scholarly critique of the ‘discourse of language endangerment,’ an ideologically charged discursive space that is kept bustling by a number of overlapping constituencies, including linguists, indigenous and minority rights activists, international organisations, Christian missions, funding institutions, conservation groups, and the media in their tireless search for ‘human interest’ to purvey (e.g., Silverstein 1998, Blommaert 2001, Hill 2002, Freeland and Patrick 2004, McEwan-Fujita 2006, Duchêne and Heller 2007). In its tone and emphasis, the critique goes something like this: the discourse of endangerment draws on and perpetuates naive Western assumptions about languages as bounded denotational codes, each with a formally stable reality and a naturalised inherence in an ethnic group that is typically described as tied, through culture, to a unique ecological niche. With the loss of each such language, the discourse warns, both the language’s rightful heirs and the rest of us will be deprived of something profound and valuable. What that something is, and what makes it compelling, varies with the intended audience and so is grounded at least as much in rhetoric as it is in analysis: where indigenous groups see autonomy rights or a spiritual connection to ancestral lands, biologists and conservationists may see species diversity, linguists the dream of a comprehensive grammatical theory, and public radio listeners a romantic stability in what is perceived to be a time of unprecedented flux and cultural degeneration (Cameron 1995).

Despite certain problematic inconsistencies these ready justifications have with one another, they have not caused much dissonance for the discourse’s consumers². After all, cultural ideas about language are known not to be

² Though they sometimes do; see Hill 2002.

rational; linguistic issues tend to be problematised in “emotive and moralistic terms” (Cameron 2007:269). Indeed, while it may be analytically suspect in a number of ways, as pointed out by the critics, the ‘emotive and moralistic’ discourse of language endangerment has been highly effective. Nowhere can these effects be seen more clearly than in linguistics itself, where the endangered languages agenda has brought about substantial shifts in the configuration of the discipline. Precisely because the cultural sensibilities animating the discourse are so widely shared – nationalist, essentializing, and appropriating though they may be – small, minority, and other peripheral languages are now recognised as valuable within linguistics in a way that extends beyond their bearing on linguistic theory (Austin and Simpson 2007). Emerging are new degree programs, training courses, publications, academic positions, and, above all, funding initiatives that emphasise fieldwork, corpus creation (i.e., transcription, annotation, and translation), grammar writing, archiving, and community language development (some highlights are listed in Appendix 1). These shifts have no doubt served to validate the field of linguistics to outsiders by making it more socially relevant after decades of intense inward focus and boundary-patrolling (Newmeyer 1986:9, Heller and Duchêne 2007:3, Liberman 2007). But they also reflect the concerns of those within the discipline to perform work that they find meaningful, and to do so legitimately on their home professional turf. As we well know, the status of languages “is tied to other forms of legitimacy” (Patrick 2007:52). This is true where languages are framed as objects of study, just as it is where they are symbols of resistance or mechanisms of state control. So if we want to understand “who is engaged, and how, in the discourses and actions to ‘save’ these languages... and what is at stake for each group” (ibid.); if we want to understand “the consequences of these discourses for the distribution of material and symbolic resources” (ibid.), then the values and forces that operate within documentary linguistics must necessarily form part of our account.

Our concern here is therefore both the discourse of language endangerment and the discourse of documentary methods that has developed within linguistics in response to it. As documentary linguists and language archivists, we want to examine the tension we feel between the moral agenda that motivates work on endangered languages on the one hand, and the way that agenda has been operationalised on the other: even as a lofty moral discourse brings endangered languages into focus for the discipline, our efforts to preserve and support these languages seem to lead inexorably to their reduction and commodification in ways that sometimes do cause dissonance with our larger aims³. Even when researchers are “clear about the

³ This is not unlike the cultural contradiction described by anthropologist James Carrier (1990) for Americans giving and receiving gifts, who face the characteristic

relationship between our analysis and our stance” (Heller 2004:286), having determined it worthwhile to “set aside complexity in the interests of strategic simplification” (ibid.), we still find ourselves unwittingly transforming our representations of the languages and communities we study into certain *kinds* of items that our stance does not necessarily sanction. As we will argue, this troubling transformation of languages from “priceless treasures” into indices, objects, and technical encodings, which documentary linguists now find taking place in their own hands, reflects not so much the kinds of specifically linguistic ideologies that critics have tended to point to as underlying the discourse of endangerment, but much more general forces of commodification, standardisation, and audit that shape the management of information in contemporary Western culture.

3. The reduction of singular languages to common exchange values in documentary linguistics

At the heart of the discourse of endangerment is a view of languages as singular in value, as opposed to common, comparable, and exchangeable. Items in the latter category are called “commodities” by social theorists. While people tend to think of commodities as items that can be bought and sold, it will be useful here to think of them in a more abstract way: commodities “have something in common with a large number of exchangeable things that, taken together, partake of a single universe of comparable values” (Kopytoff 1986:69). According to the discourse of endangerment, languages are decidedly not commodities. Taking their inspiration from similarly singularising human rights texts, the Linguistic Society of America’s statements on ‘the need for the documentation of linguistic diversity’ and ‘language rights’ (LSA 1994, 1996) illustrate this in so much as they proclaim each language to be a unique ‘intellectual achievement’ which its speakers have a right to enjoy and maintain and which linguists have a special obligation to protect⁴. But despite these

problem of needing to press manufactured objects into service as transcendent expressions of the heart.

⁴ For a dramatic illustration of the commodification of endangered languages in the commercial realm, in September 2007 two linguists announced their return from an ‘expedition’ sponsored by the National Geographic Society that was intended to bring public awareness to the problem of language endangerment – and to the institute they had formed to further their research. It was accompanied by a website (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/mission/enduringvoices/>) and a documentary film (<http://thelinguists.com/>). Through the informal channels of email lists and blogs, linguists in documentary circles registered their discomfort with the media image these materials presented of ‘linguist as hero in pith helmet,’ the loose handling of the linguistic details, and the subordination of professional goals to what appears to be a

avowed values, subtle and pervasive kinds of commodification – that is, reduction of languages to common exchange values – abound, particularly in competitive and programmatic contexts such as grant-seeking and standard-setting where languages are necessarily compared and ranked. Documentary linguists now find themselves having to play a ‘numbers game’ in which the languages they study are prioritised by the weakness of their speaker base and their ‘degree of endangerment’ using official metrics and scales, like the deceptively precise speaker and ‘ethnic group’ numbers published in *Ethnologue*, or the nine-parameter ‘endangerment index’ popularised by UNESCO (UNESCO 2003)⁵. The LSA’s Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation was recently presented with a proposal for assessing ‘adequacy of documentation’ which offered explicit accounting standards for such features as lexicon size and the kinds and quantity of texts in an ‘adequate’ collection.⁶ In Australia, the AIATSIS AUSTLANG database (<<http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/>>) provides for each language a “documentation score” that grades languages based on the existence and volume of four “types” of documentation (wordlist, text collection, grammar, and audio-visual), resulting in a single overall score between 1 and 16. As these examples show, documentary linguists are trying to answer questions about endangered languages that would be absurd to even ask about major languages.

Documentary research is now frequently framed around formal aspects of the resulting archival materials, a perspective Nathan (2004) calls ‘archivism’: quantifiable properties such as recording hours, data volume, and file

private venture. As one commentator put it, “some of us ... don’t think you can ‘document’ a language with a helicopter, a trailing news team and a day looking at rock art” (<http://angarrgoon.wordpress.com/2007/09/19/>). As members of the specialised exchange sphere in which each language’s unique value is upheld by a “common cultural code and a specifically focused morality” (Kopytoff 1986:78, 69), these commentators found it difficult to endorse an image that presupposes languages to be saleable, “the unmistakable indicator of commodity status” (ibid.).

While particularly instructive, such clear cases of commercialism are rare. The language-learning software company Rosetta Stone now has an entire department devoted to endangered languages, but the tension here is softened by the fact that it represents a response to employee demand that is heavily subsidised by the company, rather than an exploitation of a newly profitable market niche (<http://www.rosettastone.com/en/endangered-languages/>).

⁵ With the development of Geographical Information Systems, language mapping projects that give numerical coordinates to spatially locate languages and speakers are also on the rise. See, for example, <http://linguistlist.org/llmap/>.

⁶ Interestingly, given the tensions we describe here, the proposal was not impassively received by the Committee and has in fact not been publicly circulated.

parameters, and technical desiderata like ‘archival quality’ and ‘portability’ have become commonplace reference points in assessing the aims and outcomes of language documentation (Bird and Simons 2003, E-MELD School of Best Practice <<http://linguistlist.org/emeld/school/lingstart.html>>). For example, the results of proposed fieldwork in around one-third of the applications submitted to the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) are described according to a ‘recipe’ of audio resolution and sampling rate (typically 16 bit 44MHz), video file format (typically MPEG-2), transcription file format (typically .trs or .eaf) and annotation (typically using Toolbox/Shoebox). Not coincidentally, this emphasis on the formal properties of language archive materials lends itself readily to the commodifying idiom of ‘resources’ (i.e., a “richly structured, large and diverse” array of “texts, recordings, dictionaries, annotations, software, protocols, data models, file formats, newsgroups and web indexes”, as the Open Language Archives Community puts it (see <http://www.language-archives.org/>)) that ‘consumers’ like “linguists, engineers, teachers, and actual speakers” discover and access through the assistance of ‘service providers’ (ibid.).

Of course, documentation invariably involves technology, whether we are making digital recordings or simply writing down on paper what we hear, and the quality of its application will naturally shape the utility of the outcome. Moreover, the logic of endangerment means that such documentation is likely to be unrepeatably and so should be carried out with sophistication and care, using all the finest resources at our disposal. However, technical parameters such as bit rates and file formats are now often foregrounded to the point that they eclipse discussions of documentation methods that would be better aligned with the actual needs of projects. Video recordings are made without reference to hypotheses, goals, or methodology, simply because the technology is available, portable, and inexpensive. As in other areas of humanities computing, markup of linguistic data using XML threatens to “become a kind of conversion gospel that serves not merely as motivation but as outright goal for many projects” (Golumbia 2009:116). Where XML has been embraced in documentary linguistics, it has more often been as a touchstone of ‘archival quality’ than as an open-source, ideology- and template-free means for allowing each analyst to express his or her own knowledge independently of the assumptions and constraints inherent in prepackaged software (such as Shoebox/Toolbox). This is an example of linguists using technology to provide solutions through conformity to its strictures, rather than mastering and harnessing it to create custom and appropriate outcomes. The situation with what is arguably at the core of documentation – audio recording – is more starkly revealing. Many documentary linguists have a basic knowledge of audio file parameters, and will dutifully recite the evils of audio compression, while at the same time

having little knowledge about microphone types and properties, even though microphone choice and handling is the single greatest determinant of recording quality. In other words, the easily labelled and quantified ways of dealing with audio information are dutifully pursued, while the practical art and craft of great recording is ignored (see Nathan, this volume)⁷. These examples show how generic technical criteria have assumed a life of their own and are replicated independently of how they serve their users' goals.

Commodifying forces have also affected the way documentary linguists frame their relationships with the communities in which they work. Linguists' professional obligations to field communities are often formulated in terms of transacted objects rather than through knowledge sharing, joint engagement in language maintenance activities, or other kinds of interactionally-defined achievements. Over the past five years of ELDP funding cycles, for example, applicants have settled on a conventionalised approach to satisfying the program requirement that project results be "accessible to and usable by members of the language community": language primers, CDs, and subtitled videos are promised to be returned to communities in recompense for the time and effort they expended on the research. 'Community awareness and acceptance' of a proposed language documentation project is held by some granting bodies, like DoBeS and ELDP, to be distillable into the form of a letter of support from "an appropriate representative of the language community" and is required before a proposal (even to conduct a pilot project!) can be considered. Not only does this requirement have the potential to derail useful work and deform the social reality it purports to document (it can be less than obvious how to define 'the community' or determine who in the community is empowered to write such a letter), but the trade in written documents can have political consequences as projects evolve. The "extremely demanding and elaborate process" through which a particular community's goodwill was transformed into such a document led one linguist "to reflect on how much we first world academics demand of indigenous communities to conform to our needs" (Grinevald 2006:363).

⁷ Recording methods need to be taken seriously as crucial preparation for documentary research, lest researchers find themselves having to resort to trial-and-error in fulfilling their primary aim of collecting data about the languages they study. Fortunately, training in good recording methods is now being offered in programmes like ELAP, the 3L Summer School, InField, and the HRELP and DoBeS grantee training courses listed in the Appendix.

4. Knowing ‘our needs’

There is thus a substantial disconnect between the avowed values of the field and the discourse that organises the practice of documentary research. A ‘common objectifying thrust’ can no doubt be found in language study from early colonial situations onward (Errington 2001:34), but the commodification prevalent in contemporary documentary linguistics derives from two forces particular to our time. One of these is digitisation or ‘computationalism’, which demands that knowledge be controlled, formalised, and standardised in order to realise its promise of making information easily searchable and widely distributable (Shiva 1993; Golumbia 2009)⁸. The other, related force is the Euro-American culture of audit, accounting, and oversight in which quantification, evaluation, and competitive ranking are pervasive (Strathern 2000). As described by Tsoukas (1997:831), the reduction of knowledge to “measurable, standardisable, auditable” *information* tends to draw our attention away from the human action and purpose that makes it interpretable, and instead toward the indices and procedures through which the information can be managed⁹.

To understand why these forces hold such sway over documentary linguistics, we must return to the discourse of endangerment with which our discussion began. While emotionally and morally compelling to many, this discourse has given linguists a motive for responding to the issue of language endangerment while providing little guidance on the form that response should take. The substantial literature on the topic that has accumulated over

⁸ This powerful ideological force underpinning standardisation is expressed very clearly in support of another morally charged technological project, fulfilling the dream of making computers ‘intelligent agents’ through the so-called ‘Semantic Web’:

“The World Wide Web as it is currently constituted resembles a poorly mapped geography. Our insight into the documents and capabilities available are based on keyword searches, abetted by clever use of document connectivity and usage patterns. The sheer mass of this data is unmanageable without powerful tool support. In order to map this terrain more precisely, computational agents require machine-readable descriptions of the content and capabilities of Web accessible resources.” (OWL Web Ontology Language Guide <<http://www.w3.org/TR/owl-guide>>; see also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_web>)

An example of this closer to home for linguists is the project of standardizing digital language references by exhaustively classifying all human speech diversity into a set of three-letter codes (<http://www.sil.org/iso639-3/>).

⁹ As the essays in Smith and Akagawa (2009) make clear, these same forces have been felt in the attempt to create an intergovernmentally administrable system for recognising intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Here too we find there is pressure to *evaluate* (determine which specific instances of ICH deserve protection), *enumerate* (construct ICH as bounded inventories or lists), and *objectify* (attribute value to products as opposed to social processes that lead to their production).

the past 15 years can be read as a collective attempt to chart a path from a problem (languages are dying at an unprecedented rate) to a consensus on the appropriate professional course of action. Indeed, it consists in large part of case studies offered in the hope that generalisations might eventually be made across them. But such generalisations have been slow to come. For example, Grenoble and Whaley (2005) discuss four issues of critical significance for understanding language endangerment and maintenance – multilingualism, literacy, the role of outsiders, and globalisation – that linguists have hardly begun to address, largely because the main discussion of these topics takes place outside the discipline of linguistics. Even despite systematizing conceptual efforts within linguistics, such as Himmelmann's (2002) careful distinguishing of description from documentation, a set of agreed upon principles of language documentation with associated methods does not exist. The resulting questions that this leaves open are fundamental: Are our goals activist or scientific? Is documentation a research activity, or is it more closely aligned with the art and practice of creative media? Does our data consist of symbols or of audio and video? How should archives prioritise dissemination across the potential constituencies they serve (academics of various persuasions, speaker communities)? On what basis could we decide?

At the same time, with the many new academic programs, funding initiatives, and other institutions that have developed and that reinforce the endangerment discourse's moral message, documentary research has far higher stakes than ever before, if not for the survival of languages then at least for the success of the linguists who study them. We see evidence here of the 'collectibles' paradox described by Kopytoff (1986:81): as languages become "more singular and worthy of being collected", they "acquire a price and become a commodity and their singularity is to that extent undermined". In this context, documentary linguists find themselves having to represent languages in ways that must be measured and compared, but where the terms for establishing difference or superiority are unclear¹⁰. Lacking a guiding framework for assessing quality, progress, and value in their work, documentary linguists fall back on established cultural patterns, referring to quantifiable indices of language vitality or standards for the density of acoustic information even when these are not rationalised by the particular research situation.

Resolving the tensions we have been describing will require an approach to documentation that is more closely tied to the guiding vision that continues to attract linguists to the language endangerment problem. However, this goal

¹⁰ Block (2001:63), drawing on Max Weber, sees this as a problem characteristic of art in contrast to science.

is not well served by a totalising theory that distinguishes documentary work from the rest of linguistics as a distinct and separate entity (Himmelman 2002, cf. Austin and Grenoble 2007). Linguistics already has theoretically-informed ways of comparing languages for a host of reasons that are orthogonal to their moral value, and it is by distancing themselves from these that documentary linguists have been led to ask confused and unproductive questions like ‘how do we know when to stop documenting?’ or ‘how many recording hours should I put in the archive?’ – the archivist’s equivalent of the perennially frustrating question that instructors hear from their students: ‘how many pages does my paper have to be?’

What we have in mind is well within the reach of ordinary documentary linguists, and indeed community members (see also Edwards, this volume, for examples). Consider, for example, the creative use of video in Anthony Jukes’ ELDP-sponsored project on the Toratan language of North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Jukes video-recorded young people collecting and processing palm sap for making palm sugar, a traditional activity that elderly speakers were no longer able to participate in due to their limited mobility. He presented these recordings to his older consultants, inviting them to describe the videos and then video-recording their narration in turn. When viewed in ELAN the result was a pair of split-screen videos, one showing the young people engaging in the traditional activity, the other showing the older speaker’s time-aligned commentary. For distribution in the community, Jukes also produced video CDs of Toratan stories with selectable subtitles in Toratan (the vernacular), Manado Malay (the local lingua franca), or English, each imported from transcription tiers originally produced in ELAN. As another example, consider the Jewish Iraqi oral histories recorded by Eli Timan, an ELDP-sponsored researcher working at SOAS. From ELAN time-aligned audio and video transcriptions and English translations Timan generated YouTube Flash videos with English subtitles¹¹. In both of these cases, we see video being used thoughtfully by the researcher in light of the exigencies of the situation and the project’s ultimate goals.

5. Conclusions

The reduction of any object of study to comparable terms is unavoidable in competition for limited grant resources, however the particular pattern this

¹¹ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsBg_Q_JfSk&feature=related> for an example. Jewish Iraqi Arabic is now spoken only in diaspora communities in the UK, Canada, US and Israel, and Timan found YouTube to be a highly effective way of publishing his materials for speakers and their descendants who now live in those scattered communities.

reduction has followed in the case of endangered language projects is culturally shaped and contradicts the greater purpose for which the new grant programs were originally developed. What is needed is an explicit recognition that the singularity of languages is irreducible, and that the methods used to study them must be singular as well. Each research situation is unique, and documentary work derives its quality from its appropriateness to the particularities of that situation (cf. Nathan 2009). Rather than approaching endangered languages with preformulated standards deriving from their own culture, documentary linguists must strive to be singularly responsive – both to what is distinctive about each language as an object of research, and to the particular culture, needs, and dispositions of the speaker communities with whom their work brings them into contact (Dobrin 2008).

This particularity must be extended to include the interests, skills, and constraints of the researchers performing the work. After all, despite occasional references to the field as a ‘natural laboratory’, field-based projects in no way resemble interchangeable science laboratories, where measurements made using identical instruments are expected to produce identical results. Recognising this, we should strive to cultivate a subsidiary discourse of responsiveness that better corresponds to the humanistic conception of all languages as inherently valuable and worthy of attention. In this way, documentary linguists can begin to avert those unconstructive forms of commodification that are driven by bureaucratic impulses and rising digital paradigms, and bring their work more closely into alignment with the moral position that motivates so many in the field.

Appendix 1 - A partial list of recent academic responses to the problem of language endangerment

Degree programs:

MA in Language Documentation and Description and PhD in Field Linguistics, School of Oriental and African Studies Endangered Languages Academic Programme (since 2003)

MA in Language Documentation and Conservation, University of Hawaii (since 2007)

European Masters co-ordinated by Lyon-2, Leiden and School of Oriental and African Studies (to commence 2010)

Training courses:

- Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen program grantee training courses, (annually since 2002)
- Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen summer school, Frankfurt University (2005)
- Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project grantee training courses (annually since 2005)
- Archiving workshops organised by Open Language Archives Community (annually at Linguistic Society of America meetings since 2004)
- Courses at Stanford Linguistic Society of America Institute (2007)
- InField summer school, University of California Santa Barbara (2008)
- 3-L summer school, Lyon-2 University (2008), SOAS (2009)
- Ghana summer school of linguistics (2008)
- SOAS-Tokyo University of Foreign Studies documentation training course, introductory level (2008), intermediate level (2009)

Publications:

- Language Documentation and Description*, published annually by the School of Oriental and African Studies, 6 volumes to date
- Language Documentation and Conservation*, published by University of Hawaii Press, 3 volumes to date
- Essentials of Language Documentation*, published by Mouton de Gruyter 2006
- Las Bases* (Spanish translation of *Essentials of Language Documentation*), published by INALI, Mexico 2007
- Handbook of Endangered Languages*, commissioned by Cambridge University Press
- Readings in Endangered Languages* (4 volumes), commissioned by Routledge
- Special issue of *Linguistische Berichte* on endangered languages, published 2007

Academic positions:

- 6 posts specifically for endangered languages documentation, School of Oriental and African Studies Endangered Languages Academic Programme
- 3 posts specifically for endangered languages archiving, School of Oriental and African Studies Endangered Languages Archive
- 3 posts for EL specialists, including new professor, University of Manchester Department of Linguistics
- Post in EL documentation, University of Hawaii Department of Linguistics
- Post in EL documentation, University of Bielefeld
- Posts for EL specialists, University of Regensburg programme in Endangered Languages

Archives:

- Aboriginal Studies Electronic Data Archive, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (since 1994)
- Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America, University of Texas (since 2000)
- Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen Archive, Max Planck Institute Nijmegen (since 2000)
- Rosetta Project, Long Now Foundation (since 2000)
- Langues et Civilisation et Traditions Orale, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (since 2001)
- Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources, University of Melbourne/University of Sydney (2003)
- Endangered Languages Archive, School of Oriental and African Studies (since 2005)
- Leipzig Endangered Languages Archive, Max Planck Institute Leipzig (since 2005)

Funding initiatives:

- Volkswagen Foundation Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen project (since 2000)
- Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, School of Oriental and African Studies (since 2002)
- National Science Foundation-National Endowment for the Humanities Documenting Endangered Languages initiative (since 2004)
- Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research Endangered Languages Project (2005-2007)
- Fondation Chirac Sorosoro project (since 2008)
- Smaller initiatives: Foundation for Endangered Languages (USA), Endangered Languages Fund (England), Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen (Germany)

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