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Editor's Preface and List of Contributors (LDD 6)

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Editor's Preface

Peter K. Austin

The papers in this volume of *Language Documentation and Description* can be classified into three thematic areas: documentation methodology, sociolinguistics and pedagogy applied to endangered languages, and application of software tools. The volume also includes Bernard Spolky's paper on the history of the revitalisation of Maori which he presented as the *Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project Annual Public Lecture* delivered at SOAS on 26th February 2009.

The section on issues in the methodology of language documentation begins with the paper by Lise Dobrin, David Nathan and myself (an expanded and elaborated version of a presentation given at the first *Conference on Language Documentation and Description* held at SOAS in December 2007). We suggest that the current rhetoric surrounding language documentation methods often takes technology as an unquestioned goal, and in some cases this hinders rather than facilitates thinking about methodological principles and practices. This can be seen most clearly in grant applications and the criteria used to evaluate them, where certain technological and quantitative 'facts' have come to dominate the discussion. We suggest that endangered languages are being 'commodified' as a result of the culture of audit that dominates academic discourse, and that ends up treating them as entities that are to be delineated, counted, measured and stored in a universe of comparable values. We argue that in fact each language situation is unique and distinctive and this uniqueness must extend to documentation projects and to include the interests, skills, and constraints of the researchers and the communities involved in them. Such a view is more in accord with the strong moral arguments for responding to the global threats facing language diversity.

Friederike Lüpke's contribution is the written version of her talk given at a workshop entitled *What counts (and what doesn't)? Data and methodology in language documentation* held at the SOAS on 4th-5th November 2006 (other papers from the workshop were published in LDD 5 last year). She examines how the new concern for data and its representation that has arisen with documentary linguistics over the past ten years has an impact on the nature of the corpus documenters collect and the research methods available to be used for each type of material to be included. Her discussion is richly illustrated and covers the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, including

elicitation, participant observation and stimulus-based experimentation, arguing for a more reflexive concern for research methods and consideration of how different methods can be employed to complement each other. Her paper is an important contributing to the ongoing development of good practices in language documentation and is essential reading, in particular for those new to the field.

Good practices and methodological reflexivity is also the topic of David Nathan's paper on audio in language documentation. He argues that there are four key audio-related issues that require attention: audio quality, the role and nature of symbolic data, mobilisation, and protocols. Historically, he says, linguists have been unscientific in their approach to audio recording because they saw the audio recordings as *evidence* for their linguistic analysis (almost an impediment on the way to the analytical goal) rather than as *performances* that are socially, culturally and spatially situated. The arrival of documentary linguistics upsets this epistemology of the role of audio in research, since it is about documenting unique language events (and knowledge) in context. Many of these events are likely to be unobservable in future as threatened genres and languages disappear. Language documentation also means that it is important to think about the nature of symbolic data linguists associate with language recordings (eg. transcriptions, translations, annotations, as well as other types of metadata) and how such data can be linked to them, eg. by time-alignment. As Nathan points out: "the richness of symbolic information should be proportionate to the potential value of the materials to users and to the high costs of digital storage". Digital language archives have also begun to play an important role in supporting mobilisation of audio data, ie. developing deposited materials into practical resources that can be used by communities trying to combat the decline of their languages. They are also able to implement dynamic protocols for access and use of the recordings that represent the rights and sensitivities of the various parties involved in the research. The paper concludes with an overview of the philosophy and work of the Endangered Languages Archive at SOAS since its establishment in 2004.

The next section of the volume deals with topics in sociolinguistics and language pedagogy. Bernard Spolsky's paper on language management for endangered languages (given as a seminar at SOAS on 24th February 2009) presents an introduction to the theory and practice of language management with a case study of Navajo, which has seen critical changes in its vitality over the past 60 years, and especially in the past 30 years. From once being spoken by the vast majority of Navajo children entering school on the Reservation, the Navajo language is now in retreat and only a tiny fraction of children are learning it at home as their first or co-equal second language. Spolsky shows

how beliefs about language, changes in the use of English and Navajo in different contexts, and overt and covert policy choices (including literacy) have resulted in this current situation. He concludes that “only a major change of policy, with concerted grassroots and government support for active language management, is likely to reverse” the extraordinarily rapid from Navajo to English that is now taking place.

David Nathan and Meili Fang’s paper on language documentation and endangered languages pedagogy argues that these two fields have much to learn from and contribute to each other. They argue that “creating and mobilising documentation in support of pedagogy might also inject some new energy into documentary linguistics”. They are critical of current approaches to language documentation and question whether linguists, in fact, should have priority in setting the agendas for responding to language endangerment, being the main practitioners of language documentation, and being the people who have privileged access to the main outcomes of such documentation (the annotated archived corpora). They argue that collaboration between linguists and experts in language pedagogy could result in new documentation methods that better represent the relations between language, culture and learning, and result in outcomes (such as encoding of pedagogically relevant metadata) that are more flexible and usable by the language communities. The second part of their paper concerns language pedagogy as it could be applied to revitalisation of endangered languages and discusses learning goals and motivations, planning, course types and settings, and the particular problems that arise in endangered languages situations. They draw on their experience with the Karaim Summer Schools held in Lithuania over the past several years, and present and illustrate what they call a “Performance Approach to language learning and teaching” that features, among other things, the use of drama as a component of language pedagogy. This approach has been effectively used in the Karaim context and could be taken as a model for other endangered languages communities to consider.

The contribution by Anicka Fast (that developed out of her MA dissertation submitted at SOAS last year) focusses on how language choices are perceived and managed by different components of a community of Mennonite believers in Burkina Faso, with strikingly different ideologies about ethnic languages in particular being maintained by missionaries, church leaders and the lay members. Through on site fieldwork, including participant observation and detailed quantitative analysis of language attitude interviews, she paints a picture of the widely differing views about the roles of lingua francas versus ethnic languages, for example, that give rise to conflicting positions on such things as translation and language use in church services. This conflict does

not take place in a political vacuum. While community members emphasise inclusion and empowerment through decoupling ethnic identity and language, she argues that the essentialising ideology of the missionaries that fundamentally connects language and identity (just as much of the academic discourse on endangered languages does) is supported by Western linguistic scholarship and Bible translation discourse that functions to maintain unequal access to resources for legitimisation.

The next paper also looks at access to resources for legitimisation and authenticity, as Catherine Edwards examines the implications of indigenous video production for language maintenance in Mexico (a paper that also results from her SOAS MA dissertation). She explores so-called ‘subject generated’ film and video produced by indigenous film-makers in Mexico (called *video indígena* in Spanish) and argues that there is a need for “dialogue between ... fields such as language documentation, visual anthropology, and language revitalisation [that] will help indicate how scholarship can best support film and video production taking place among minority language speakers”, in Mexico and elsewhere. She argues that video provides an ideal medium of indigenous expression for endangered languages, and that the creation of indigenous video has important consequences for visual anthropology, in particular, in recent years. However, there can be conflicts, already seen in Mexico and other places, between creative expression in an endangered language and the desire to communicate with a broad audience and to use video for activism and awareness-raising in the wider world. Also debated is the extent to which “active use of film technologies can aid language vitality in a community, and to what extent it threatens vitality, by, for instance, providing community members with skills enabling them to work in majority language media”. Edwards concludes that video production in endangered languages can have a positive influence, and that providing support for languages along with achieving other communicative and political goals can co-exist by, for example, subtitling in a lingua franca, and combining such productions with other works in majority languages in order to fund the minority language projects. It will be very interesting to see how this plays out in the future as video production becomes increasingly inexpensive and indigenous film-makers become increasingly professional.

The final paper by Stuart McGill discusses a particular method of using the computer software application *Toolbox* to document grammatical tone, and applies it to the Cicipu language of north-west Nigeria that McGill recently completed his PhD dissertation on. We hope that this paper will be

the first of a future series of contributions to this journal that deal with technological issues in language documentation, support and archiving.

I am grateful to all the authors for their contributions, and to the panel of reviewers who read all the papers and provided detailed feedback on them (Oliver Bond, Mary Chambers, Lise Dobrin, Friederike Lüpke, David Nathan, and Julia Sallabank). Design, formatting and layout of the volume was managed wonderfully by Tom Castle, who also designed the cover.

As usual, readers are encouraged to send comments and feedback on the papers presented here, directed to the address on the inside front cover.

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