Endangered Languages
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Ninth lecture (27/04/2015)

Tenth lecture (04/05/2015)

Language Documentation: Introduction

Questions of the day

- Why are languages documented?
- What is meant by „a language documentation"?
- What does a modern language documentation contain?
- What are „communicative events"?
- What problems may arise when collecting data from a language?
- How are records of languages organized and stored? Professional and less professional documentation

Why document a language?

- To have a record for the future

- Linguists: to have material for their investigations (general linguistics, historical linguistics, language typology …)

- Speakers: to preserve the language as part of the culture, the community's heritage

- Educators: to have material for teaching the language and about the language

If your language were endangered, what would YOU want to document for the future?

Given the limits of time, money, and persons: what should be documented first?

The traditional language documentation (19th-20th century)

- done by linguists (often only 1 person)
- done by outsiders (not part of the community)
- published on paper (usually in small editions)
- may be inaccessible to the speech community
- includes a dictionary, a grammar, and a collection of texts
- text collection: most often narrative texts (traditional stories)
- grammar: contains isolated, often unnatural sentences

The current language documentation (beginning of 21st century)

- done in interdisciplinary teams: linguists + other specialists,
- outsiders and insiders: speech community is involved not only as „informants"
- done for various purposes
- published electronically (and on paper)
- stored in digital archives
- contains written, audio and video material
- documents the use of the language in various situations

Definitions (Himmelmann 2006)

- a language documentation is a lasting, multipurpose record of a language

- a language documentation should strive to include as many and as varied records as practically feasible [...] Ideally, then, a language documentation would cover all registers and varieties

- contains a large set of **primary data** which provide evidence for the language(s) used at a given time in a given community

Basic distinctions

- Primary data: recordings of speakers

- Metadata: description of the recording

- Analysis: translation, annotation, comments

- Results of analysis: grammar, dictionary

Documentation is not description

Language description focusses on linguistic structures and systems, and typically aims at the production of grammars, dictionaries, and collections of texts, the intended audience of which is usually linguistics specialists. By contrast, **documentation** is discourse-centered: its primary goal is the representation of a range of types of language use. Although description may draw on a corpus, it involves analysis of a different order, aiming to provide an understanding of language at a more abstract level, as a system of elements, rules, and constructions. (Austin 2014)

Primary data include

- **communicative activities** (how speakers use the language)
  - ➤ can be **observed**

  ? Give examples of communicative activities!

  ? What constitutes a communicative activity?

- **metalinguistic knowledge** (what speakers know about the language)

  "the ability of native speakers to provide interpretation and systematizations for linguistc units and events"
  - ➤ (usually) cannot be observed, but **elicitated**

Some questions and problems with collecting primary data

- what is possible to document? what cannot be documented?

- ethical questions

- legal questions: who owns the data?

- observer's paradox: can you speak "naturally" when you are observed and recorded?

- divergent needs of linguists and speech community

- data graveyards and zombie voices

„Data graveyards"

- without theoretical grounding language documentation is in the danger of producing "data graveyards", i.e. large heaps of data with little or no use to anyone (Himmelmann 2006)

- evidence from archival deposits shows that video tends to be poorly used by documentary linguists, with video recordings being made without reference to hypotheses, goals, or methodology, simply because the technology is available, portable and relatively inexpensive. (Austin 2014)

„Zombie voices"

The alarming projection that up to ninety per cent of the world's languages will become extinct by the end of this century has prompted a new sense of urgency among linguists and other language scholars to rush out and record the last utterances from the last speakers of 'endangered languages'. As the last speaker utters her/his last words, the 'expert' is there to record this important moment and preserve it for all time. Among the benefits from such preservation efforts is the ability to play back the recordings at any time in any place. In popular media this process is described as 'saving the language' through recording and documentation.   …

(continues next slide) [illustration: trailer of „the linguists",
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HInOD7VrCdY]

…

Unfortunately, these recordings are not living voices. Rather, they are zombie voices—undead voices that are disembodied and techno-mechanized. They are cursed with being neither dead nor alive. They become artefacts of technological interventions, as well as expert valorisations of linguistic codes. (Perley 2012)

What could/should be done to „re-embody" the voices?

Homework

1. Got to the DOBES project site at:

http://dobes.mpi.nl/projects/

Visit the site of 3 projects and check what is said about

a) the project's aims,

b) the team members (what specialists? outsiders or insiders?),

c) the potential use of the documentation (research questions? education?).

Prepare the answers for 1 project..

Homework

2. Read

- (as much as you like of) Chapter 10 in the Book of Knowledge: (http://languagesindanger.eu/book-of-knowledge/language-documentation/)

- (parts of) Ulrike Mosel: Fieldwork and community language work. (Chapter 3 of Essentials of language documentation, eds. Jost Gippert, Nikolaus P. Himmelmann, Ulrike Mosel. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006) [recommended for reading pp. 67-74 + conclusions]

Making recordings for language comparison

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the following possibilities?

- Gathering vocabulary with a Swadesh list.

- Recording a recitation (or reading) of the Lord's Prayer.

- Recording a reading of The North Wind and the Sun.

- Recording a retelling of the film „The Pear Story".

http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Swadesh_lists

http://clas.mq.edu.au/oz_transcription/NorthWind.html

http://www.pearstories.org/docu/ThePearStories.htm

Homework

3. Prepare a recording for the site
http://languagelandscape.org/

- Browse the site, read instructions, register.

- Think of what you want to record and how you want to record it: Which language(s)? Which speaker(s)? In which situation? Which communicative activity? What preparation is needed? Audio or video? Which technical device?

- Think of the metadata you will need/want for this record (write a list).

- If possible, go ahead and do the recording! (max 5 minutes, better shorter).

References

- Himmelmann, Nikolaus. 2006. Language documentation: What is it and what ist it good for? = Chapter 1 of *Essentials of language documentation*, eds. Jost Gippert, Nikolaus P. Himmelmann, Ulrike Mosel. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1-30.

- Austin, Peter K. 2014. Language documentation in the 21st century. *JournaLIPP* 3, 57-71. Online at: http://www.lipp.uni-muenchen.de/

- Perley, Bernard C. 2012. Zombie linguistics: experts, endangered languages and the curse of undead voices. *Anthropological Forum* 22.2, 133–149.

- Videos in Syriac:

  http://www.sorosoro.org/en/2010/01/videos-in-aramaic-languages-mesopotamia/