Identity, speech community, and language concepts in language documentation.
A sociolinguistic approach[1]

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ABSTRACT

Documentation of endangered languages has fostered a new discipline in linguistics, namely documentary linguistics and it has undergone many changes in its general approach in recent years. Mainly focussed on language description initially, it has evolved towards a deeper documentation of language practices within communities and, more recently, made a concrete contribution of linguists to speech communities for revitalisation of their languages, wherever this is the community's desire. Despite the changes that have occurred in the approach of many language documentation projects, it is still necessary to focus our attention on some issues which are crucial in the documentation of any language. Therefore, before moving towards the main issue of this paper – that is, what counts as language in language documentation – it is necessary to undertake a reflection on some basic concepts such as identity and speech community, as well as on the we-concept. The aim is to clarify for the reader the basic assumptions that I adopt in considering what counts as language in language documentation. I will start with the identity concept: therefore, I will discuss the concepts of 'we' and 'speech community', and I will propose some concluding remarks which offer further reflections on the language description and documentation framework.

Keywords: *identity, speech community, language, variety of language, language documentation and description, linguistic diversity, sociolinguistics, ethnographic approaches in language documentation.*

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1. On the concepts of identity and speech community

Identity has been widely discussed and, at the same time, deconstructed within anthropological debates. Authors such as Abu-Lughod (1991), Amselle (1999), Anderson (1983), Fabietti (2000) and Remotti (1996), have proposed the non-existence of an identity concept, at least in the way it was developed in the nineteenth century and

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is often perceived nowadays.[2] Indeed, their arguments have largely demonstrated that identity is an atemporal concept which automatically frustrates itself.[3] Nevertheless, as (Western) human beings, we cannot avoid using the term 'identity' in referring to ourselves; consequently, expressions like "my identity is" or "I belong to", as opposed to "you are" and "you belong to", are very common. However, if we reflect on how the identity concept applies in our own daily life, we must admit that we continuously adapt ourselves to each of the specific moments or communicative events in which we are involved.[4] What really matters is that the specific moment in which we are involved will never be replicated in the same way. Consequently, while adapting to the surrounding circumstances, I can equally define myself as an individual human being and a total part of something (even though Pascal [1962] largely contributed to the demolition of the ego concept). Nevertheless, each time we interact with someone different, we move ourselves within a dimension other than that of our surrounding reality. For instance, I can perceive myself as a citizen of my town when I am in another town within "my" state, whereas I experience myself as a citizen of "my" state when I am in another geographical space far away from my home. Equally, I am a smiling and flexible person among friends and a rigid one when I am in the classroom. Consequently, how is it possible to define an identity concept? I think that we should admit that we are all what we need to be in a specific communicative event in order to interact efficiently with others – if we want! – or to ensure our face (cf. face-work theory by Goffman 1955; 1974 and Brown and Levinson 1987).

This also means that we can define ourselves and our identity only if we have considered the *we*-dimension beforehand, because we are always part of something (a community, a state, a group of friends, etc.). Indeed, we will not be able to define ourselves in any way if we do not consider what is around us, even when we are still convinced by the idea that we do not need others in order to understand who we are. As Remotti (2010: 65) underlines, this means that we cannot renounce the identity concept, even though it is a flexible, always changing, one, since it is a natural tendency of human beings to act as if it does exist. However, what we can do is be aware of the fact that it is a mere illusion to define our own identity concept within fixed boundaries as such and such.

At the same time, this means that the *we*-dimension is another construction since we adapt to different *we*-dimensions at the same time: we are friends, we are workers, we are speakers, we are religious, we are Italian, or we can become Italo-American. We always change the *we*-dimension to that to which we originally belonged. Furthermore, we are something or someone within our perception, while we can be someone else within the perception of others. Indeed, the way others perceive us not only redefines us but can also affect our own perception of who we are.

A similar approach can be adopted to disentangle the perception or the definition of a linguistic or speech community.[5] Silverstein (1996: 285) clearly differentiates them. The former refers to "a culture of standardization" where a group of people "are united

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[2] Even though in Western countries there is currently a massive operation of deconstruction of identity, above all among young people, promoting a fluid understanding of gender, along with a long series of labels for classifying all the possible genders available.

[3] A list of further references on this topic, which does not pretend to be exhaustive, is Bayart (2009), Boumard, Lapassade, and Labrot (2006), Sahlins (2000), and Sciolla (1983; 2000).

[4] This means that we can have multiple but defined identities which we constantly build and change according to the context in which we act.

[5] For some traditional definitions of speech communities, refer to Bloomfield (1933: 49), Duranti (1997); Gumperz (1968), Hockett (1958: 8), Le-Page (1968: 189–212), Lyons (1970: 326), Labov (1972: 120), Laitin (2000), Silverstein (1996, 1998).

in adherence to the idea that there exists a functionally differentiated norm for using their "language" denotationally". The term 'speech community' is employed for a group of people having multiple 'languages'. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the nationalist ideology of European thought developed the concept of space as dominant not only to define new states, but also to apply to the definition of social spaces. In so doing, this nationalist ideology helped to create physical borders between people, and contributed to separating what was previously a continuum of people and consequently of speakers. Through this procedure, language communities were delimited, and this is particularly evident also in countries colonised by Europeans, such as in Africa and Asia. In these contexts, in fact, not only were new 'artificial' communities created, but European values were imported. For example, in India, Nehru and Gandhi, the leaders of the struggle for independence, had both studied in Europe. While conducting their struggle for freedom, they imported to and adopted in their own land the European (nationalist) identity concept: "we must be Indians under one single language, we must use our Indian language" (quoted in Muru 2009).[6] But what was this Indian language? How could it be possible to define one single (language) identity within a country that Khubchandani (1991) defined as a multicultural rainbow? Thus, how could it be possible to mark borders which identify a monolithic language community in this kind of context? And above all, how was it possible to apply the concept of 'one nation, one language' to India? As Anderson (1983: 4-7) points out:

> nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind […] the nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of it encompassing perhaps a billion human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations […] finally it [a nation] is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.

The result is that the only possible way to identify a nation is to determine an A which is different from a B. This means that A starts and ends at a specific point, and the same holds for B. Consequently, the nineteenth-century idea of an organic nature of a group of people arose and was identified with the idea of community itself (Morpurgo 1996; see also Pennycook 2005: 60-75). At this point, it was necessary to find elements which could help the community to be solid and tied together, and language was one of the strongest tools available. Indeed, through language, one can unify and at the same time mark differences between people, and thus (physical) borders between groups (Gumperz 1982). However, this idea is not common everywhere in the world. For example, Le-Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985: 209-215) demonstrated the flexibility of language perception among speakers of Creole, Belizean, and Spanish, which changes according to context, time, and people. Indeed, they claimed that language was used for self-ethnic identity only sporadically. Furthermore, members of the younger generation seemed to be able to establish their identity separately from their language.

Taking into consideration the definition of a speech community in using the language of science, it is possible to observe how much it is anchored in the idea of language, that is: a group of people who speak the same language. Only within sociolinguistic and anthropological frameworks have speech community definitions been unanchored from

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[6] For the original debate about this issue, see Bipan, Mukherjee, and Mukherjee (1999); Khubchandani (1991), and Pattanayak (1981).

the idea of language, and definitions nowadays may be more or less strictly correlated to it. For example, in Labov (1966), a speech community is a group of people with shared norms and common evaluations of linguistic variables. In Eckert (2000), rather than concentrating on patterns of interaction, the focus is on why people come together, in what practices speakers engage, and how they shape and are shaped by their linguistic usages: she refers to a 'community of practice' rather a 'speech community'. Finally, for Duranti (2001), the speech community is not an entity that is observable in a historical, social, and linguistic dimension as a unitary system, but rather, as a set of practices that are socially shared.

Indeed, as already stated above quoting Silverstein (1996), speech communities are not linguistically homogeneous (or identifiable and stable) but are organisations of diversity where people may speak several languages having a set of norms about how each is to be used. As Hill (2006: 114-117) states, "speech communities will differ not only in manifesting different kinds of language structures, but in manifesting different patterns of use". Even though there is no 'best' definition of a speech community (rather, it is the scholars' attitudes which count), it is true that in the majority of cases, language is not only a tool for the expression of culture but also of identity, which marks the contraposition between majority languages and minority languages, where the former corresponds to the bigger group of people and the latter to the smaller. Therefore, the linguistic policy that states adopt can determine the nature of the relationships among these majority and minority groups. Within this perspective, languages assume a specific nature; they become perceived as objects useful to define (monolithic) groups, each with a historical and social valence. Once again, the language concept, as well as the identity concept, and the *we*-concept discussed above, are all considered as labels identifying discrete categories, while all these concepts are flexible within each individual. Not only is it "important to realise that communities are not monolithic: there are frequently conflicting beliefs and ideologies within speech (and language) communities regarding language, its status, domains, functions, policy – and who has the authority or legitimacy to decide any of these" (Austin and Sallabank 2014: 14), but one has also to keep in mind that some attempts have been made to define 'a language' and these have shown that any useful definition is heavily dependent upon context (Bobaljik, Pensalfini, and Storto 1996: 3). Indeed, as Hill (2006: 114-117) asserts, "speech communities are not linguistically homogeneous (or identifiable and stable!) but are organizations of diversity".

2. What counts as language in language documentation?

This section discusses the language concept further, focusing on how it is used in language documentation and how it could, or maybe should, be used instead. Assuming that each speaker adapts their ways of speaking to the context of situation and to their interlocutors as well as the topic, it is possible to affirm that rather than referring to 'language', one should use the term 'variety', as has been sustained within sociolinguistics (Weinreich 2010 [1979]). Therefore, the first issue related to the language concept and its identification or definition is a series of questions:

- How do the speakers use the language varieties?
- For what purposes, with whom, and in what contexts?
- What kinds of speakers use different language forms?
- How much can speakers control the varieties they use?
- How do speakers behave towards different language varieties?

These questions are strictly related to observation of language within a sociolinguistic framework, where the focus is on diversity of speech (Hymes 1972: 38).

Therefore, the questions concern what is the speaker's own language – what language do they speak, with whom, for discussing what, in what context, and when do their ways of speaking change?[7] This demonstrates that even for a single speaker it is not possible to ascertain one language, but rather a set of varieties which may partially overlap or may totally differ. This is quite common everywhere in the world, above all in plurilingual contexts, but it is perceived differently in Western countries where the nationalist political idea is strong and the idea of 'the nation' is usually associated with an unrealistic monolingualism. For example, it is evident in Eritrea and Ethiopia, where, for example, Saho speakers – whose population includes several clans, most of them with their distinctive territories – refer to their own language with different glottonyms (*Saahot luqha* or *Saahot waani* – 'language of the Saho' – with variants *Sāho, Saho, Šaho, Ṣaḥo, Šoho*).[8] In this regard, Fill and Mühlhäusler (2006) claim that both the process of identification and the way languages are named are far from being an act of objectivity. The Saho language does not differ from other examples. Previously it was an oral but unwritten language, which was later recognised as one of the nine national languages of Eritrea. This policy change brought the need to select a national writing system and thus Saho is written today in a Latin-based orthography. However, reality counts three major dialect groups of Saho (Northern, Central, and Southern), along with three writing systems and four major groups of poetry genres which are functionally differentiated (Banti and Vergari 2010; 2014). Therefore, to what does today's 'Saho national language' correspond? Does it correspond to an abstract variety selected to represent the social group at a national level, or to the ways of speaking that speakers really use in their daily interactions?

A similar situation is found in Sardinia, where the language named Sardo was included among the languages to be protected by Italian law 482/1999 on minority languages despite the fact that no Sardinian spoke it since it does not exist: rather, two main varieties (*logudurese-nuorese* and *campidanese*) represent what Sardinian people really speak.

Other possible contexts include situations where language is not perceived as a tool for identifying someone or something. This is the case among the Bantu in Southern Africa, where the concept of ethnic or tribal identity may be strong but the concept of a tribe 'owning' a variety of Bantu as its own language has been definitively recognised as an invention of the British colonisers, "whereas the Shona themselves had been accustomed to thinking of the linguistic behaviour of all Bantu as one continuum of 'language'" (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985: 240). Finally, as Childs, Good, and Mitchell (2014: 173) state, "multilingual diversity […] is not merely about how many languages an individual may have competence in. A single language may show a similarly complex diversity of functions, taking on variable significance depending on where it is used and with whom". Therefore, multilingual diversity can be addressed when referring to a single language. It is clear that a language (or a dialect) should be seen to be for the most part a cultural construct. For example, in this regard, Gal (2006) asserts that languages are (also) a European invention, while Duranti (1997: 332)

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[7] This is the series of questions asked in during my lesson at the Summer School in Language Documentation held in Naples, 10-14 July 2022.

[8] Saho varieties have been largely studied and documented by Moreno Vergari (*Ethnorêma*) and Giorgio Banti (formerly University of Naples "L'Orientale"). See Banti and Vergari (2010: 83-108; 2014: 133-144).

proposes not only rethinking language as an object of study but also deconstructing the idea of language itself. He even goes beyond this call and claims that his aim "represents an interdisciplinary effort to improve on the notion of linguistic communication currently used or implied in the social sciences and the humanities", where the focus is not on the language used in communication but rather on the relationships among people,[9] and then on the basic need that people experience during a communicative act – that is, to be recognised by others.

In conclusion, consider that:
(1) speakers adapt their language to each context, topic or interlocutor involved in speech acts;
(2) language serves to negotiate spaces, identities, topics, borders, etc.;
(3) language is the link between social categorisation and stratification and it is used to create meaning through social interactions.

This means that the first important step that should be undertaken in language documentation (LD) is to document the contrasting uses of multiple varieties by a given group of people. Consequently, analysis related to languages should focus on linguistic repertoires and practices.[10] Indeed, as Lüpke (2010: 60) states, "Language Description and Documentation (henceforth LDD) research often takes place in multilingual and multilectal settings in contexts where no standard variety exists" and diglossic and triglossic situations should also be exhaustively documented because they are included among the linguistic practices of a community.[11] Given these premises, we can move to discuss how LD should incorporate a sociolinguistic approach.

3. Traditional approaches in language documentation

A typical definition of LD refers to systematically recorded representations of both spoken and written forms of a language in their appropriate sociocultural context.[12] As Himmelmann (1998) states, LD includes all those methods, theoretical frameworks and tools that are deemed necessary for the recording of a natural language or one of its varieties (see also Austin 2006; Austin and Sallabank 2011).

According to Austin (2006: 87-112), language documentation begins with the development of a project to work with a speech community on a language, and its major goal is the creation of lasting multi-purpose records of languages or linguistic practices through audio and video recordings of speakers and signers, and annotation, translation, preservation and distribution of the resulting materials.

Taking these definitions of language documentation and description into account, it becomes apparent that the focus of research is on the language Y (or on a variety of it– that can be endangered or not), of which one ideally covers a diverse range of genres and contexts, which is spoken by the community X and which must be recorded, described, preserved, and distributed.

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[9] "For linguistic anthropologists the question of the nature of language cannot be separated from the question of the use of language by particular individuals at a particular time and with time as one of its fundamental dimensions" (Duranti 1997: 337).

[10] For further reading on this issue, refer to Calvet (2006), Gal (2006), Pennycock (2005), Riciento (2005), Sallabank (2011).

[11] At the same time, the social significance of code-switching, like all uses of varieties of language as acts of identity, should be considered. In this regard, see Gumperz (1977) and Le-Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985).

[12] For further reading about language documentation, refer to Austin (2006; 2010), Austin and Grenoble (2014), Grenoble (2010), Grenoble and Furbee (2010), Himmelmann (1998; 2006), Lehmann (2001), and Woodbury (2003; 2011).

What does this assumption imply?

Considering the previous paragraphs, it should clearly emerge that the foundation on which LDD relies implies the theoretical assumption that speakers can be grouped within a (stable) delimited speech community[13] and within this community they learn to identify themselves through the language they speak. Therefore, "language is the label used to distinguish one group from another, mainly to reinforce the notion of cultural identity and often, unfortunately, superiority or inferiority" (Bobaljik, Pensalfini, and Storto 1996: 3). Hence, there is usually a community that is at a disadvantage with respect to another; this community uses a language that may be threatened by the language of the strongest community, and this language turns into one of the only means of expressing a group identity. Consequently, the loss of the language within the minority group would be equivalent to a loss of identity for the community of speakers itself and, as a consequence, the loss of its culture, since it is their language that expresses it.

Consequently, by identifying boundaries defining language, identity, and speech community, these concepts are turned into stable concrete elements which exist within a specific reality and at a specific time, being so transformed into a unified organic element. On the contrary, language can be a component of identity construction but not necessarily the only one or the central one.[14]

Consequently, also considering the multilingual diversity characterising speakers' repertoires, the first difficulty that LDD has to face is the question of what should be documented and how.[15] Secondly, one should wonder if and how much a LD carried out with these principles can contribute to reinforcing the idea of preservation. As Austin and Sallabank (2011) claim, traditional LDD is typically based on data elicited from elderly people instead of younger ones. The younger generation is usually kept apart from the process (unless the focus is on language acquisition which looks at how children acquire their verbal repertoires), or is taken into consideration only in order to demonstrate that the language is changing or is becoming lost, and that it is progressively becoming endangered. This seems automatically to imply that linguists should document a language in order to preserve it in the way it is spoken by the elderly people[16] – since they are more representative of the 'pure' concept of language we want to document or describe. If one applies this perspective, then it seems that each language in the world should be considered as a threatened language, since all of the oldest speakers will eventually be lost and young people will be the innovators. In this way, there are speakers of minority languages who become 'fossilised entities' that must be studied and preserved in the way they are without giving them the chance to participate in the changes the world is undergoing. On the other hand, it pushes small communities of speakers living in the same area to fight in order to keep and defend their own language which is perceived as a tool for their identity affirmation.[17] In my opinion, LDD could bring unfair results if the relativism related to the concepts of language, identity, and

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[13] For example, when discussing research methods in LDD, Lüpke (2010: 60) talks about the need for LDD to define the target population and its boundaries—indeed, the need for identification of the speech community. On the documentation of endangered languages and speakers, see Grinevald (2003) and Dobrin and Berson (2011: 187-211).

[14] I am grateful to Peter Austin for this observation on the issue language = identity.

[15] For further discussion on research methods in language documentation, refer to Lüpke (2010: 55-104).

[16] Peter Austin (personal communication and 2014: 13) underlines how this view is commonly part of the ideology of many communities also.

[17] For further reading about the use of languages as tools for the creation of identity, refer to Amselle (1999; 2001), Amselle and M'Bokolo (2008), Fabietti (2000), and Gallissot, Kilani, and Rivera (2007). For a discussion on the construction of identities, refer to Assam (1997), Kroskrity (2000), and Said (1978). For a reflection on cultures, see Abu-Lughod (1991), Geertz (1973), and Kubchandani (1991).

speech community is not taken seriously. For example, it could enable puristic ideologies and attitudes which are harmful to endangered languages rejecting innovations such as loan words, code mixing, and code switching.[18] Furthermore, according to the kind of data which are collected, speakers and their languages can become stereotypes which are kept alive in a way that is more folkloristic than real. For example, Himmelmann (2006: 4) talks about the risk of "data graveyards", stating that there will be

> Large heaps of data with little or no use to anyone […] language documentation is not a theory-free or anti-theoretical enterprise. Its theoretical concerns pertain to the methods used in recording, processing, and preserving linguistic primary data, as well as to the question of how it can be ensured that primary data collections are indeed of use for a broad range of theoretical and applied purposes.

Over the last few years, the contribution of sociolinguistics to LDD has pointed out how arbitrary the decision is, when taken alone by linguists, concerning the kinds of data and uses of language they are going to collect. Sociolinguistics has highlighted how LDD carried out up to this point has tended to focus its recordings mainly on those elements considered necessary for the creation of grammar, dictionaries, and texts (the so-called Boasian trilogy, which remains central to LDD grammar). Therefore, in order to avoid the risk of documenting fossils, as well as not to put pressure on a group of speakers, there is a need to listen to the speakers and to understand if and in which ways their ways of speaking are threatened. Secondly, it needs to be understood whether there is a real desire and will among the speakers to maintain a specific language. This is the only case in which linguists should be allowed to intervene and make efforts to help them revitalise their way of expression. As Florey (2004) claims, language documentation and language maintenance do not mean preserving the language untouched like an artefact in a museum.

4. A sociolinguistic approach to language documentation

Migge and Legalise (2012) point out that is not possible to think about language documentation if the language is not observed from different perspectives; this particularly holds true in multilingual societies.[19] Hence, Migge and Legalise (2012: 308) have carefully investigated the nature of the Takitaki language from various angles (i.e. language usage, speakers' perception of it, typology of speakers, etc.) "using different types of data, data collection methods and analytical methods" and have "stressed the idea that without all this, any linguistic description would be incomplete and simplistic at worst." In fact, what emerges in their study is that knowledge of the Takitaki language often "appears to be indispensable for carrying out some activities in [the speakers'] everyday life, but people's feelings toward it are ambivalent. For most of them, the aim is not to learn or speak and understand it perfectly, or to emulate Maroon practices, but to get along and to interact with people locally" (Migge and Legalise 2012: 310). Austin and Sallabank (2011; 2014) and Grinevald (2003) have also demonstrated how important it is to adjust the scheduled programme to collect the right corpus for language documentation in the light of this new awareness – indeed, what

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[18] I am in debt to Peter Austin for this observation.
[19] See also Le-Page (1968).

speakers, what language, what context, when, how, etc. ways of speaking should be documented.

This points once again to the notion that defining a language is not easy, since it does not correspond to a specific entity. Migge and Legalise's (2012: 310) analysis of the social profiles of people saying that they practice Takitaki indicates that what is commonly referred to by the term Takitaki "consists of different language practices of varieties."

Therefore, before carrying out any kind of recording and preparing a corpus that might be representative of the description and analysis of a language, one should understand:

- What is it that speakers think their language is?
- Whether the language is a real ethnically identifying criterion for those speakers with whom we are going to collaborate.
- Whether it is possible to analyse languages without taking human beings' identity negotiations into proper consideration. Is it possible to exclude and not consider in which situations and kinds of interactions the speakers exchange and negotiate their 'identity'?

As Childs, Good, and Mitchell (2014: 171) claim, "sociolinguistic documentation can be understood as extending our conception of language documentation beyond its typical, nostalgic emphasis on specific ancestral codes to the sociolinguistic contexts and patterns of language use in a given community". In fact, sociolinguistic documentation should collect linguistic data in a carefully considered range of contexts reflecting the social features that characterise the different social groups. Furthermore, the collected data should be associated with a satisfying representation of the sociolinguistic contexts where various codes are used. This means that the traditional sociolinguistic interview[20] is not enough. Rather, other methodologies and methods coming from anthropological studies should be included, such as participant observation which is also "a constructive methodological resource for those who are committed to conducting their research in an ethical manner" (Schwarz and Dobrin 2018: 256). At this regard Schwarz and Dobrin (2018: 260) while underlining that "linguists are more aware than ever before that language documentation does indeed involve "linguistic social work"" emphasise "how the ethnographic method of participant observation can help documentary linguistics establish positive social relationships with language communities" (Schwarz and Dobrin 2018: 264).

This also implies that a language documentation project should be carefully planned in terms of time to be spent within the community. In conclusion, as Harrison (2005: 22) states, a sociolinguistic documentation practiced with concerns for socio-cultural variables should also aim to be an "ethnographically informed language documentation", which advocates for "the inclusion of ethnographic methods […] a restored balance between structuralist concerns and attention to [the] cultural content of speech".

Embedding the practices of LDD within a sociolinguistic approach should be understood as a valuable theoretical and methodological framework whose purpose is to promote change and/or social development in human communities. Indeed, sociolinguistics, both micro and macro, can contribute to a better understanding of how

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[20] On the sociolinguistic interview and analysis of language variation, as well as on sociolinguistic and ethnographic approaches in fieldwork, see Briggs (1986; 1999), Meyerhoff *et al.* (2011), Milroy and Gordon (2003), Schilling-Estes (2007; 2013), and Tagliamonte (2006).

the LDD can lead towards a particular language policy[21] instead of another one. Sociolinguistics also reflects on the perception the speakers have of themselves or want to show to others when they are involved in communicative acts. Furthermore, it analyses the language usage differences among speakers – i.e. what variety is spoken in a certain situation and with whom. All these analyses can contribute to a better understanding of what should be documented and, above all, how this documentation should be carried out. Sociolinguistics can provide the mental flexibility that it is necessary to maintain in a LDD project when dealing with people and varieties of languages. Furthermore, by considering a sociolinguistics approach along with ethno-linguistic and the pragmatic ones, LDD can be included as a valuable means through which to promote the revitalisation of a language.[22] As Flores Farfán and Ramallo (2010: 1-12) argue, one should carry out a "[s]ociolinguistic of development, in which the revitalisation of linguistic communities is the priority"; this "opens [a] new perspective for the emerging field of linguistic documentation, in which the societal aspects of the research have frequently been marginal".

The basis should be that LDD should aim at bringing benefits to a group of speakers in the first instance, and to think about the merely (ethno-)linguistic aspects secondly. Indeed, it is necessary first to make a choice and decide what kind of approach one wants to adopt while conducting a documentation. We can pursue a passive (and utilitarian) documentation, by which we obtain a simple collection of linguistic data that may contribute to linguists' scientific knowledge of the world's languages and to linguistic theory. This approach essentially ignores what are going to be the effects on the group of speakers we plan to work with, or what is going to happen to them or the records after we leave. In this way, we can simply work by stressing the idea of the existence of a language which has the right to be preserved and possibly transmitted to future generations with the aim of keeping diversity alive; whenever this is not possible, we can try to maintain a picture of the language through its description. The risk with this approach is of marking the concept of alteration/diversity[23] negatively and excessively stressing the concept of identity.

Another approach linguists can adopt is an active and supportive/sympathetic LDD. Indeed, by discarding the idea of what it means to document a language as a linguist,[24] it focuses on how the linguists' studies can contribute to the people with whom they work, and to the broader society as well (see Austin in this volume).

I do not want to say that LDD must become a new means of revolution for the existence of human beings, but rather we can assume that linguistics as a discipline can cooperate with other disciplines in order to bring advantages and benefits to others, and specifically to those working with us as consultants. We maintain that linguistics can actually do that without renouncing its first intent toward a broader understanding of the

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[21] For a discussion on the connection between language documentation and language policy, refer to Sallabank (2007: 144-171). For a discussion on language ideologies and beliefs about languages, refer to Austin and Sallabank (2014) and Gal and Irvine (2000: 35-84).

[22] On language revitalisation, see Austin and Sallabank (2014), Grenoble and Whaley (2006), and Fill and Mühlhäusler (2006).

[23] For further discussion about a theory in the field of language documentation, refer to Louanna Furbee (2010: 3-24) and Mosel (2006: 67-85).

[24] Berge (2010: 51-66) discussed the concept of adequacy in documentation: "we can derive some general guiding principles, many of which suggest that, ultimately, adequacy in documentation means letting go of preconceived notions of what it means to document a language as a linguist" (2010: 52).

theory of language; if that is the case, why should we not consider this opportunity more seriously?

In conclusion, to adopt a sociolinguistic framework in language documentation means to de-emphasise the ancestral code and the idea of an ideal speaker/signer and of a pure language that has a greater right to be documented. It means moving away from a language-as-system view to a language-as-practice view, since this contributes to emphasising situated language use. Therefore, the best practice is to apply a transdisciplinary approach whose goal is integration of approaches, including not only sociolinguistics but also ethnographic methods (i.e. life histories, naturalistic conversation, communicative modalities including gestures and other non-verbal resources). Within this framework, we emphasise situated language use and focus on the linguistic habits of speakers, including all their linguistic varieties and their multilingual competencies (e.g. code-switching and code-mixing; local slang and 'secret' languages; the language of everyday activities as opposed to traditional narratives). It also suggests that researchers remember that "language practices are indeed influenced by socioeconomic and political changes which constantly take place" (Sugita 2007: 243), inviting us to understand the dynamics that lead people together as part of a group, the activities in which they are engaged, the common experiences they share and, above all, the needs and interests of those who identify with a given language or way of speaking.

5. Concluding remarks

The previous sections have discussed concepts such as language, community of speech, identity, *we-* and others, which are crucial to language documentation. Not only has it been argued that it is difficult to apply these labels to reality, but also that misapplication could lead to unfair results in LDD. Therefore, it has been proposed not only to adopt a sociolinguistic approach in LDD but to contemplate different methods, including ethnographic ones, arguing that this would give the necessary feasibility to any LDD project. Here we discuss further what has been proposed above with the aim of offering some conclusive statements about what it would be necessary to do.

Firstly, our concept of language, whether endangered or not, should change and it should be treated as a flexible concept. Therefore, LDD should consider this possibility in greater depth, and languages which are considered endangered should no longer be transformed into roses to be treated with extreme delicacy or butterflies to be collected in a box. In this light, that which should be preserved is not a particular language, as if it were a living organism, but the diversity of ways of speaking among human beings, because, as Edwards (2009: 232) claims, "language is not organic. Languages themselves obey no natural imperatives; they have no intrinsic qualities that bear upon any sort of linguistic survival […] they possess no 'inner principle of life'" (see also Fill and Mühlhäusler 2006; Mühlhäusler 1996, 2000; Mufuwene 2002). Rather, speakers are alive and they make choices about the ways they want to speak. The problem is that this choice often – above all with regards to threatened languages – is not a true choice, since political, social, and economic factors threaten both linguistic and environmental-biological diversity, pushing people to abandon their languages and their style of life, not only because of the unfavourable social and economic conditions in which threatened language speakers usually live but also because, as Austin and Sallabank (2011: 10) claim, there is "a common assumption, especially among non-linguists […] that the usage of a single language would bring peace, either in a particular country or

worldwide". For example, Brewer (2001) assumes that linguistic diversity contributes to interethnic conflict, while examples like the former Yugoslavia show how linguistic divergence (and then diversity) were more a consequence than the actual cause of conflict. Furthermore, linguistic divergence there was the ultimate tool created to delimit and maintain borders. Indeed, what was formerly known as Serbo-Croatian is now split into Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin (Austin and Sallabank 2014; Brewer 2001; Greenberg 2004). On the contrary, many other realities demonstrate that multilingualism and the desire that speakers have to maintain distinctive linguistic realities is a common pattern. For example, the acquisition of multilingual competence has been a normal part of every child's socialisation among Cape Keerweer people in northern Australia (Le-Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985: 240-242). Indeed, it is much more a modern assumption that language diversity is a problem, both in the capitalistic view as well as in the 1930s USSR perspective. Anderson (1983: 43) claims that the print languages laid the bases for national consciousness and led to a crucial impact on the diversity of languages and of human beings.[25] Indeed, before capitalism arose and before the invention of print as tool for a nation-state ideology that idealised the axiom one people = one language promoting a monoglot mass reading public, mutual incomprehensibility among people was not a problem. Language diversity was of only slight importance historically. For example, in the medieval period it was religion rather than languages which played a role of identity or belonging.

Consequently, one should not document and describe languages but rather peoples' ways of communication; one should not talk about endangered languages and the loss of identity of communities of speakers because, as Austin and Sallabank (2014: 15) have already pointed out, 'language' as a concept might mean something different to different people. As a consequence, language may not be the only thing representing the ways in which people identify or express themselves. Therefore, establishing an identity to be preserved through a language can led to the idea that the recognition of that language is the only means through which human beings can perceive themselves or be recognised by others. Furthermore, emphasising the concept of identity may lead to the idea that too many identities (and, as a consequence, too many languages) within the same shared reality can become a problem for the maintenance of peace within a society. On the contrary, documentation and description should enhance the discovery and reconsideration of diversity—that is the normal status—and should recognise the possibility of accustoming people to diversity itself as their main aim.

Consequently, in my opinion, the focus of LDD should move ahead to document the diversity of language, trying to contribute further to discarding the negative idea of the *we-* dimension and *other-*dimension. Indeed, the contraposition between different *we-* implies that if we could all communicate through one language, our collaboration and co-habitation could improve. In contrast, if we move towards other fields of research (i.e. environment, agriculture, nutrition, etc.), it is clear that the general assumption to which everybody is headed is that diversity is not only better but necessary for our survival. Where can this diversity be found? It could be embedded within varieties of

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[25] In this regard, one can also stress how much writing is crucial to the empowerment of a language, much more if it is printed writing. For example, Remotti (1996: 54) underlines how the power of writing offers a way to bolster the concept of identity: "the written text is something that fixes the identity, removing it from the 'flux' and the different 'alternative possibilities' in order to fix it in a perpetual (or almost) form" [il testo scritto è qualcosa che inchioda l'identità che la stacca dal "flusso" e dal turbinio delle "possibilità alternative" per fissarla in una forma perenne (o quasi)].

languages. Consequently, it is not necessary to document and preserve the world in the way it was, since changes are normal and have always occurred, but to learn from what was good and positive in a previous stage of the world, mainly before capitalism, and to readapt that knowledge (also available through the description of small cultural realities) to the society of today.

Secondly, LDD made with the aim to preserve diversity through the documentation of a specific language perceived as a symbol of identity for a community can lead to unfair results, emphasising the minority of some groups or denying them a chance of change. Should linguists stop documenting languages? Should we simply sit and wait for the linguistic diversity in the world to disappear? As Krauss *et al.* (1992: 8, 28) stated long time ago, in my opinion we should not. On the contrary, we should carry out the kinds of research and studies that aim to maintain and enhance the value of linguistic diversity, and we should help people to live together within this diversity.

One first step towards this approach is to carry out an LDD oriented towards communities, specifically by linking the needs and interests of speakers/signers to the documentation of practices (Mosel 2006: 67-85) and communicative understandings.

LDD should describe how speakers pick up the varieties available to them or create new ones. "If a language is action, as proposed by Malinowski, and the ways we speak provide us with ways of being in the world, as suggested by Sapir, Whorf, and many others, linguistic communication is part of the reality it is supposed to represent, interpret and evoke" (Duranti 1997: 232). What should be documented is not the language, but the linguistic communicative mechanisms, that process through which human beings interact and share the world and reality, and negotiate its recognition in the society.

In order to do that, it is necessary to plan the documentation and the kinds of data to be obtained from a different perspective (e.g. by taking into account the possibility of documenting conversations instead of narrative stories told by elderly people: at least the proportion of conversations should be higher than that of narrated stories, which are still important for achieving other results), therefore adopting the methods and techniques suggested by sociolinguistic and ethnographic studies (Lüpke 2010: 67-96).

We should stop talking about the almost obsessively stated 'endangered languages', or at least, we should consider the idea of talking about 'denied recognition of human beings' along with 'endangered languages'.

Instead of academic discussions (only and merely) about endangered languages as if they were monolithic, linguists should take into consideration what is actually under threat: as soon as a different variety of languages disappears, relationships among human beings loosen and worsen. What is endangered is the ability to be flexible, which may make us able to tolerate and adapt to the real diversity instead of conforming to an artificial uniformity.

LDD should contribute to promoting the spread of diversity and should reveal to the world that there is no reason to be scared about it. On the contrary, it is only within this diversity that we can exist. In doing this, LDD could contribute to the improvement of those groups which are representative of a small piece of diversity and to whom it is usually required to choose between being what they would like to be and what it is better to be according to our model of society, or political and socioeconomic pressure, leading them to become uninterested in their own way of existence.

Finally, I would argue that LDD should be carried out with the purpose of achieving the recognition and then the acceptance of people and their ways of expression. If

language is one of the means through which these human beings can find the strength to allow others to be discovered, through which they can affirm their existence as different human beings, then the language is welcome. However, people should have the freedom to express themselves in the ways they choose: therefore, one should not protect languages but rather linguistic rights. If we want to consider the concept of language as a tool for communication through which we build our relationships, we can say that this objective may be lost, change, disappear, or reappear in a different form, or change just a little. Knowledge of a language that undergoes one of these transformations should not represent a problem or lead the speakers to choose between two entities, the *we*-concept imposed from the outsider on the group or the in-perceived *we*-concept as it is understood within the group, when it can simply be an inclusive and exclusive *we* at the same time.

LDD should become a campaign for sustaining diversity as a natural and, above all, necessary pattern of, to, and for the world.

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