Language Documentation

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Language Documentation is a new area within applied linguistics that has emerged as a response to the growing crisis of language endangerment. The emphasis is upon methodologies for data collection:

- encouraging researchers to collect and record a wide range of linguistic phenomena in genuine communicative situations;
- using high quality sound and video recording to make sure that the results are the best possible record of the language.

Himmelmann (1998: 166) wrote:

> *"The aim of a language documentation is to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community ... This ... differs fundamentally from ... language description [which] aims at the record of a language ... as a system of abstract elements, constructions, and rules."*

Language documentation has also been made possible by mature information technologies that now allow to create sound and video recordings and integrate them with text and other explanatory or analytical material.

Careful archiving available language documentations is of primary importance for:

- language communities, as well as
- linguists and other researchers.

Digital archives indeed make it possible:

- ➢ to access and search catalogues from any location with internet access
- ➢ to easily deliver materials by network or on CDs and DVDs, for local language communities
- ➢ to express sensitivities or require restrictions on access to selected materials.

Additionally, local language communities get stronger relationships with their language heritage materials, because multimedia materials are more easily used by them for local activities aimed at supporting their languages.

1. Procedures in language documentation

Step 1. *Finding speakers who can serve as language informants (aka language teachers or language consultants).*

       nb: interview typology

- interview with a conscious informant;
- group interview with more informants who discuss together their different answers;
- covert interview with an informant who is not aware he is being interviewed;
- interview with an educated informant (he/she gives appropriate answers, but often has only a limited competence in the language variety that is being studied);
- 'dialectological' interview with an illiterate informant who is completely or almost monolingual;
- interview with the aid of an interpreter;
- interview in a location that is far away from where the language is spoken vs. interview held where it is actually spoken while living and working with them there.

Step 2 a. *Traditional standard field work:*

a) recording words and expressions;
b) transcribing them, i.e., writing them down phonetically;
c) analysing the materials to uncover the structure and functions of the language;
d) obtaining broad sociolinguistic information, e.g., location of speakerc ommunities, patterns of bi- or multilingualism, perseption of dialects or sociolects, etc.

       Usual results:

- an extensive or short grammar of the language,
- a dictionary,
- scientific articles on selected topics related to the language.

Step 2 b. *More thorough field work:*

e) collecting 'texts', i.e., stories, narratives, personal histories, explanations of how culturally important activities are carried out, speeches and other literary forms, including poetry and songs;
f) collecting data relevant to anthropological linguistics (aka ethnolinguistics), e.g., recording the performance of texts and other occasions of language use by means of sound and video recorders, collecting data on ethnotaxonomies, on material culture (of the Wörter und Sachen kind), on name systems (proper names of people, proper names of animals, names of places), etc.

Step 3. *Field work aimed at language documentation*

A language documentation project aims at creating audio, video, graphic and text documents covering how a given language is used in a variety of social and cultural contexts. It thus has to:

- collect data,
- record them,
- analyse them, and
- archive them

in order to:

a) create a range of high quality materials to support description of a variety of language phenomena;
b) enable the recovery of knowledge of the language even if all other sources are lost;
c) generate resources in support of language maintenance, revitalization and/or learning.

Results:

- ✓ video materials,
- ✓ audio materials,
- ✓ images,
- ✓ written materials, e.g., transcriptions, descriptions, analyses, lexicons, texts
- ✓ metadata, i.e., structured written data about the above materials.

Typically, language documentation is aimed at providing a wide audience with knowledge about a language and how it is used culturally, socially and interpersonally, i.e., not only academics, but also community members, teachers and learners.

References

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Journals

Language Documentation and Description (http://www.hrelp.org/publications/papers/)
Language Documentation & Conservation (http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/ldc/)
SIL Language and Culture Documentation and Description (www.sil.org/silepubs/index.asp?series=947)