

# New Perspectives on Endangered Languages

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John Benjamins Publishing Company

# New Perspectives on Endangered Languages

Bridging gaps between sociolinguistics,  
documentation and language revitalization

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# Exploring links between documentation, sociolinguistics and language revitalization

## An introduction

José Antonio Flores Farfán & Fernando Ramallo

Since its inception, the documentation program has posed a series of open questions. Relating documentation, sociolinguistics and language revitalization, establishing an agenda of research priorities, constitutes an important issue which invites developing a productive debate to which this book hopes to contribute. Pursuing to link the documentary, sociolinguistic and revitalization programs a series of tasks are at stake. In the light of the potential cross-fertilization of these interdisciplinary fields, prefiguring and exploring the need to connect documentation and revitalization is a crucial one. The chapters presented in this book are outstanding contributions to this purpose. As major representatives of the documentary linguistics field, all participants aim at the advancement of finding connections between the three agendas. In the quest of an exegesis of such trinity, let us mention and briefly discuss some of these open questions, touching upon what to our mind are critical issues.

The considerable rapid growth of the language documentation field has witnessed the emergence of a number of documentary linguistics trends with different emphases. The identification of types of documentation carried out in the last decades lead to the construction of two opposite paradigms, even as conflictive ways of developing documentary research which notwithstanding nurture each other. Bearing in mind the aim for which the present volume was called upon, linking three very rich and complex agendas, let us divide documentary practices in a continuum; ranging from what we would provisionally call active documentation or documentation oriented to the community versus received documentation or documentation with a major concern for scientific descriptions of endangered languages. An important tenet in and by itself, the latter no doubt has allowed establishing important repositories of digital archives of several representatives of the endangerment continuum worldwide. This trend constitutes a growing field which involves the creation of open digital archives

(see for example the DoBeS program;<sup>1</sup> see also Franchetto or Reiter in this volume). Even when this is an important task, it is yet not enough, especially in the light of communities' perspectives, in particular those oriented to the retention and survival of their ancestral tongues.

As we all know, the documentary practice can become very demanding and time consuming in the endeavor of collecting and registering data. Reaching the point where at times there is little space to fulfill other objectives beyond language documentation *per se*. A wider conception should overcome the risk of jeopardizing one of the most important utopias of the documentary program, linking the needs and interests of speakers themselves to the documentary practice, which might be left only at the level of a *desideratum*. Even when schematic, this distinction allows outlining a series of issues to be taken care of in terms of theoretical, methodological as well as empirical grounds to develop best practices for language documentation and revitalization. Leaving speakers interests out of the linguistic documentation processes often clashes with actors' perspectives, in which the use of the language belongs to a much more complex linguistic ecology.

The documentary program inspired by the interfaces between documentation and sociolinguistic theory and method plus the revitalization imperative requires finding connections between several forms of constructing the documentation process. What is documented, who documents who, when and how the documentation takes place, in which conditions, and so on? The documentation itself is only one part of such ecology, in turn directly linked to social and political issues. Outstandingly, power differentials affect and in the last analysis determine documentation as expressed in forms and types of corpora we construct in direct interaction with speakers. In this respect, types of data are constructed and negotiated according to specific power dynamics and hierarchies, a point rarely explicitly acknowledged – not to say conceived as part of the documentation endeavor. Let us devote some attention to this issue providing some illustrations.

## 1. Issues of power in documentary linguistics

Let us briefly consider the politics of power in field linguistics, on which documentary linguistics is based. Especially in the field of endangered languages, which has witnessed a growing interest in the last few decades, posing a series of interesting

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1. The acronym DoBeS is an abbreviation for Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen – Documentation of Endangered Languages. Its financing agency is the Volkswagen Stiftung (Volkswagen Foundation). For more information see <http://www.mpi.nl/DoBeS/>

quests regarding among others the issue at hand; namely, the materialization of power in and by discourse in the making of documentary research. The interest that the field of endangered languages in its relationship to power and discourse represents is evidenced in a number of facts even entailing the reconfiguration of priorities of the linguistics agenda itself, in turn pinpointing to the political economy of power in academia (Flores Forfán & Holzschneider 2010). The reconfiguration of priorities in the linguistic agenda has witnessed the emergence of two “new” fields; namely, language documentation and revitalization, which much more work devoted to the first than to the second, producing a gap between these two fields that we should start to seriously overcome if we are to effectively contribute to the future of endangered communities and their languages.

Due to this state of affairs, we will devote some space to analyze the prism of power and discourse and their dilemmas and caveats in these emergent fields. By definition, in contrast to documentary linguistics, descriptive (field) linguistics swiftly distances itself from speakers (cf. Himmelmann 2006) in the extreme case establishing an exploitation relationship with the subjects which are considered objects, exerting epistemic violence, conceiving actors as means to an end; that is to say depositories of data to produce phonologies, grammars, dictionaries and advancing in the interpretation of the typology of the world languages, demonstrating what is and what is not possible in terms of its diverse structures.

As is well known data in descriptive linguistics is edited – a power and ideological gesture. For example, contact phenomena can be considered marginal, secondary or at best parenthetical, at times totally discarded. Moreover, interrogatory elicitation even produce induced forms according to the linguists’ “descriptive” theoretical dreams, not to speak of biases. The context in which linguistic data is “elicited” is omitted thus deprived from its interactive nature, discourse texture and construction; including of course the power relationship from which it stems. Another good illustration of a power issue is the selection of “best informants”, which represent the linguistic ideal of a speaker – an “uncontaminated”, “pure” (ideally monolingual) but ironically a bilingual one. As an overall result of a descriptive or extractive linguistics practice, highly artificial varieties are ironically produced, as we will illustrate in more detail below, eloquently pointing to the linguist’s – “informant” political economy.

Sociolinguistics has demonstrated that such ideal speaker does not exist, pinpointing to a wide open variety of “real” speakers, an investigative priority of the documentation, sociolinguistics and revitalization agendas. Giving rise to a series of concepts and terminology which correspond to different types of individuals, ranging from owners of the language, re-callers, semi or even pseudo, last and of course death speakers of the language, among several others (for examples of a wide range of such very different speakers see Dorian or Muysken, this volume).



On the other hand, documentary linguistics arises (although not for the most part explicitly) precisely in response to these and other descriptive biases; it pretends to be exhaustive with respect to the construction of data, another defining and characteristic feature of the documentary program. This is expressed in the production of metadata in the form of thoroughly annotations of the context(s) in which materials are gathered, with commentaries on different aspects of the situation, speakers, etc., – especially with respect to the ways in which the linguistic materials are collected. Moreover, as part of the documentary linguistics agenda, it pursues to be multipurpose, including coping with the needs and expectations of the communities (cf. Gippert et al. 2006). This last desideratum, the main focus of language revitalization, is not always the first and foremost purpose of documentary linguistics. In the field of language revitalization, which is most of all a political project, the main interface with academia implies balancing power between researchers and the researched, pursuing to establish a set of priorities directed to reversing language shift (cf. Fishman 1991). In this sense, the field of language revitalization implies a new type of relationship between academia and speakers of endangered languages, giving rise to new (power) epistemologies in the making of research (cf. Franchetto, this volume; Flores Farfán 2005).

## 2. Voices from the field

In Flores Farfán research in indigenous communities (e.g. 2006), he has come across a number of instances of different hierarchical discourse practices as those manifested in the use of research instruments. Applying a questionnaire and other research instruments invites an interesting revision of the power issues at stake in the interaction linguist – “informant”, which in turn are linguistically indexicalized. In passing consider that historically actually most dictionaries are collections of pieces of power interactions, which in the case of Mesoamerican languages such as Nahuatl or Maya have produced a well documented contact history giving rise to a number of neologisms and circumlocutions to express pre contact, inexistent cultural items, such as horses, sheep or other animals, along with religious terminology. Some of these words have become part of the repertoire of the communities up to this day and indeed express key new cultural acquisitions: e.g. *tomin* “money”, some faded away representing ephemeral uses of language, a telling process of the imposition of a hegemonic tongue versus the ongoing disappearance of an increasingly compartmentalized language. For instance, in Friar Molina’s Mexicano dictionary of 1571, a missionary variety arose, induced by evangelization needs, which together with religious neologisms include lexical items pinpointing to a



very careful speech on the side of Molina's collaborators, suggesting not only a high attention to discourse, but the condescending ideology towards the Friar, as part of a power relationship materialized in discourse. For example, *noamoch* "my book" (lit. my codex) in extemporaneous speech would normally be reduced to *namoch*; body parts would obligatorily be possessed, yet in the dictionary we encounter absolutive items such as *maytl*, "hand" or *tzontli*, "hair", etc., pretty much induced forms (cf. Flores Farfán 2009).

Similar issues still in deed emerge in the practice of contemporary field linguistics. Within two attitudinal trends that emerge in the making of field linguistics – a cooperative versus a non-cooperative one. Recall that one leads to a situation of an extreme condescending ideology, materialized in the emergence of inexistent, at times extremely creative, ideolectal linguistic expressions, pretty much strange to everyday usage, such as the ones just quoted above. A very careful speech and phenomena of hypercorrection and purism are also present as part of the above mentioned ideology. Thus speakers in contact with linguists produce "new" and at times even unintelligible forms or varieties of their languages! Highly indexing the power differential between the researcher and the so called "informant" – also a pretty telling term if thought as indexing a person conceived as a depositary of data meant to be extracted.

Among other indexicalizing functions that loans may fulfill, nativization might also represent another power (dulcification) strategy on the side of hyper-cooperative speakers. Converging with a tendency to avoid borrowings as much as possible, in turn shows an extreme purist attitude, indirectly pinpointing to the endangered status of the language (for interesting examples see for instance Hill & Hill 1986; Flores Farfán 2009). This is the case of several words that are elicited via questionnaires, such as kinship terminology in which speakers choose to produce forms as "the brother of my mother" instead of simply uttering the borrowing for "uncle", in use in actual practice in the Nahuatl tongue. For instance, in Balsas Nahuatl instead of using the Spanish loan *tio*, "uncle", which corresponds to the everyday syncretic use, in its possessed form, *no-tio*, "my uncle", in elicitation speakers utter descriptive forms or circumlocutions such as *iikniw de nonaan* "the brother of my mother" (cf. Flores Farfán 2006). This has been occurring already for centuries. Even when utilizing spontaneous triggering discourse instruments inspired by experimental sociolinguistics, such as oral or visual stimuli, *amates* "bark wood painted paper" stimuli, applied to study generational differences in Mexicano speech, speakers still pay attention to the presentation of the self as part of a power-discourse ritual, manifested for instance in the use of numerals (which in everyday speech are mainly in Spanish) and Classical Nahuatl (Mexicano) innovations, such as no longer used postpositions, e.g. *ipan*, "on top", instead of the

modern common preposition among adult and young generations *pan* “on top”; (compare: *ipan matlaktli waan see amatsiintli* “in the eleventh amate”, instead of *pan amate once*).

Paradoxically, linguistic ideologies such as purism legitimize specific practices such as abandoning the use of an indigenous language in settings like the primary (home) or secondary spaces of socialization (schools); perpetuating destructive ideas about the nature of the language in question. Such ideas include judgments about the generally negative possibilities of the indigenous tongue, reaching the point where some speakers consider that their language does not allow a written grammar or constitutes only a “dialect”, is incomplete, defective and the like. Degrees of purism in the endangered language constitutes also an ideological mechanism of legitimating power, showing a confrontation of interests of certain speakers who intend to present themselves as “real”, “authentic”, “good” actually even the best speakers of a language (cf Tsunoda 2005; Grenoble & Whaley 2006), as the above examples suggest.

Field linguistics is an excellent example of a power situation in which such ideologies about languages abound, are deployed and even perpetuated in prescriptive forms such as whole grammars. Thus induction of rare or inexistent forms, the selection of “informants”, discarding some speakers and data over another, cataloguing and classifying, editing the materials, etc., have as an ultimate expression purist varieties of languages which eloquently indexes of the power relationship between linguists and their “informants”.

Power differentials directly affect and thus are a key part of the documentation process. These facts invite sociolinguistics and documentation practitioners to reconsider the role and place of power in the materialization and expression of discourse differences and how this exercise could be turned in favor of speakers of the languages themselves. This awareness invites to articulate a different approach, outstandingly with respect to the quest for more and better forms of revitalization, which after all pursues to balance power relationships in the making of (documentary) research.

Filling the gap between documentation and revitalization thus invites a more speaker-centered approach to the documentation discipline not only incorporating speakers in the documentation process but opening the possibility of allowing a more equal participation on the side of the speaker in the whole process. This poses a series of open questions. These include identifying and analyzing speakers’ expertise knowledge as manifested in heterogeneity of players and actors, in linguistic structures as expressed in typologies of speakers arranged according to a series of criteria such as power and variability or the vitality or degrees of endangerment of the languages, etc. Serious consideration of these amongst other many other variables would allow developing new forms of documentation closer to the growing concern of revitalization. For instance, carrying out active or even *activist*

*documentation* by speakers themselves alongside with developing language revitalization methods, analytical abilities and the production of educational materials in their own language would probably have a positive cumulative effect in the retention and maintenance of endangered languages, opening interesting possibilities for their future, counteracting the destructive forces that today still overwhelmingly favor language shift worldwide (Florey 2008). This conception, which implies taking the next step beyond fieldwork, is what Grinevald (2003) refers to as “fieldwork *by* speakers of the language community” compared to other forms of threatened language documentation: “*on* a language”, “*for* the language community” and “*with* speakers of the language community”.

### 3. The present volume

The purpose of this volume is to contribute to the debate regarding the perspective of documenting languages “with revitalization in mind” (Amery 2009). Each of the six works included in this volume compose a prominent contribution to many of the challenges we have just set forth. We hope these efforts contribute to a significant advancement of the discussion about the importance of working collaboratively on the three agendas in regressive sociolinguistic contexts.

In Chapter 1, Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald discusses the possibilities of survival of Manambu, a language spoken by a few thousand people in Papua New Guinea. In a line similar to the previous chapter, the author places the possibilities of this language’s survival in the value which the community has for it in a context of great linguistic diversity and multilingualism, with recent changes in socioeconomic conditions and with numerous endangered languages. As in other communities in Papua New Guinea, Tok Pisin has achieved such a level of community presence that not only is it now the majority language in communicative interactions – albeit with much code-switching –, especially among youth who consider it to be “easier”, but it is also now the language of authority. Yet knowledge of Manambu adds value and its study and use in strongly ritualized exchanges elevates the symbolic power and the status of the people inside the community. This has been complemented by the strengthening of a conservative attitude towards language, painted in purist overtones, whose yearning is to protect the language from any foreign contamination, while understanding that this is the best remedy for its survival. It is a case of diglossic reversion, linked to the reproduction of that which is sacred, and communication with the divine, something that in these communities has great value in the sense of maintaining a legendary and historical oral culture, demonstrating the importance of that which is sacred in the preservation of marginalized languages.

In Chapter 2, Nancy Dorian addresses a new and rarely documented aspect of the practice of documentation and revitalization. When a private variety expands its use to include formal domains, new tensions arise from fieldwork in the community. Faced with the confidentiality problems associated with working in a private environment that bases its entire methodological strategy on the creation of a framework of trust among actors, including the external researcher's use of the language in communities where the formal use of minority or indigenous languages is less common, the researcher who opts for working in public contexts may find himself or herself with less cooperation on the part of the community in the measure of that his or her work privileges communicative practices and language maintenance strategies very far, formally and functionally, from the traditional ones. Such is the case of the construed variety in academia or schools, which encounters resistance from the every-day communicative practice of the community, according to Dorian.

In Chapter 3, Bruna Franchetto embarks on a deep reflection upon the relationship that exists in all fieldwork between the researcher and the indigenous population of the subject communities. From her 30 years of experience among the Kuikuro (Brazil), the author sheds light on the complex processes involved in an indigenous community accepting a work of documentation without ever losing its dominant position as a witness of immaterial knowledge with differential values, frequently with conflict, for the different agents (Dobrin, 2005). The chapter invites us to reflect upon the true reach of documentation, such as scientific work which must provide rewards for all rather than some. In other terms, this would fall under folklorization of the documentation as an end in itself. The success of the documentation will depend not only on the scientific and technological advances, but also in good measure on the researcher's capacity to integrate his or her expectations into a system of foreign and distant cultural and communicative references. In this sense the language speakers themselves develop documentation about the researcher, the hunter becomes the hunted and in practice they demand of him or her to play by their rules in order to complete their own documentation. Even more so, the chapter shows that different types of documentation are effectively possible, as mentioned earlier. The work of Franchetto with the Kuikuro of Brazil is a paradigmatic example of how quality documentation can go hand in hand with revitalization processes, or even still with the strengthening of a threatened language, as is the case with the empowerment of the language-speakers involved in the processes. An example of this is the training of Kuikuro videographers.

In Chapter 4, Lenore Grenoble presents the case-study of two communities in which Evenki is spoken. Evenki is a threatened Tungusic language with a significant dialectal variety spoken in Siberia. This type of situation is a vivid example

of the need to approach jointly the practices that the documentation and revitalization ought to exercise in order to attempt to favorably orient the future of these communities of speakers and their languages, while maintaining awareness of the context of linguistic contact and the sociolinguistic dynamics generated within it. From this perspective, the more oriented towards revitalization the documentation is the more effective and relevant it will be. The production of materials for the education system, for example, becomes a necessary strategy for the construction of an effective pedagogy for the preservation of Evenki. This sentiment is echoed by the Evenki speakers in their communication with linguists. Grenoble's chapter is a sublime example of how good documentation is essential to unravel revitalization processes and how the coordination of the agendas of local language-speakers with those of the linguists is possible and results in a "win-win" situation.

In Chapter 5, Pieter Muysken analyzes the causes of the Uchumataqu (Uru) language's disappearance and the recent attempts to revitalize it through an actor-centered approach originating from the need to bring together the interests of different participants and focusing on the connections among sociolinguistics, documentation and language revitalization. In a context of great eco-linguistic fragility, this language has been replaced by Spanish and Aymara, currently the dominant language in the Bolivian Altiplano. The author bases his argument first on the consideration that the decline of Uchumataqu witnessed many external factors (migratory movements, changes in economic models, population loss, exogamy and ecological transformation) as well as local values and attitudes of the community and local actors implicated in their maintenance and intergenerational transmission. This chapter is of much interest in that it demonstrates that the reversion of displacement is possible, as is the revival of a language and culture considered extinct. This is not a case in which the emergence of a national state, as in the case of Hebrew, or the defense of a language by a powerful bourgeoisie, as in the case of Catalan or Basque favors the revival of a language; rather, revitalization is emerging in the context of the vindications of a marginalized oral cultures as Uru, which was considered assimilated by the Aymara. Uru now has a favorable breeding ground in the current context of political vindication of the indigenous groups in Bolivia.

Last but not least, in Chapter 6, Sabine Reiter describes the crossfertilization between sociolinguistics and documentation that she has developed during five years of work in the Awetí community (Brazil). In the multilingual context of *Parque Indígena do Xingu* (The Indigenous Park of the Xingu), indigenous communities that speak different languages coexist and share a common cultural system that favors cooperative relationships and mixed marriages among communities, resulting in a complex multilingual situation. The Awetí community has recently

divided itself into two villages with partially differentiated linguistic contact situations, but still subject to the strict linguistic policies of Upper Xiguan society which decree that notwithstanding the parents' language, all children must at least learn the language group of their village's ethnic group. Even though this suggests some level of assurance for the survival of the language, unique from other mega-diverse linguistic situations, apparently the penetration of other languages (Kamaiurá and Portuguese) are having a negative impact on the vitality of Awetí. In an effort to contribute to its revitalization, the author highlights the interest sparked by the documentation project, including the involvement of Ametí youth.

From the beginning, all of these are first steps that we must continue to strengthen to achieve the possibility of a labor of "revitalization", recovery and even promotion in the long term of threatened languages. This book in its entirety, with its contribution of new and exciting results, lays the foundation for this aim.

#### 4. Conclusions

Understanding sociolinguistics as a theoretical and methodological framework which attempts to promote change and/or social development in human communities presents important epistemological challenges. A sociolinguistics of development (cf. Djite 2008), in which the revitalization of linguistic communities is the priority, opens new perspectives for the emerging field of linguistic documentation, in which the societal aspects of research have frequently been marginal. The need to focus on the documentation of linguistic communities which seeks to contribute to the revitalization of these communities requires changes in both theoretical and methodological perspectives. Instead of creating mere museum pieces for the future (as has been the major trend up to now), it is necessary to revitalize or reactivate the actual use of endangered languages in the present time in order to place language(s) at the center of the community's development.

In the state of the art in the new field of documentary linguistics sophisticated archives and repositories have been produced to handle and preserve large amounts of data. These have played a prominent role in producing robust corpora, yet not so much in the revitalization of endangered languages. Archiving has been largely limited to the concerns of a small group of individuals, practitioners in documentation, specifically linguists with an interest in language description and typology. At times these activities are grounded in best practice guidelines, paired with the use of software, and coding schemes for interlinear speech data analysis and transcription. Yet documentation pursues links with wider interests and audiences, in particular speakers, as has been well established in the field (cf. Gippert et al. 2006). For instance, even when speaking of sustainable data,

almost no attention has been paid to the discussion of methodology both for archiving plus presenting teaching and revitalizing materials. There are few efforts of revitalization in modular and interactive multimedia for example. Indeed the field of documentation lacks anything that is not sequenced annotations or linguistic descriptive documents, with the interpretation that links knowledge of the language with knowledge of the code. If we are to really contribute to stop the fatal decline of many languages of the world, disciplines such as sociolinguistics should play a much more definite role in defining the links between both agendas, which also has lot to offer to the area of sociolinguistics. This is what the present volume looks to inspire.

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# The social life of a language

## Will Manambu survive?

Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald

The island of New Guinea is probably the most linguistically diverse and complex area in the world. The Sepik river basin displays cultural as well as linguistic diversity and fragmentation, perhaps more so than other areas of New Guinea. Many of the Sepik languages show signs of endangerment. Manambu, from the Ndu language family, is spoken by about 2500 people. Many Manambu children acquire Tok Pisin, the local lingua franca, as their first language, using it in their day-to-day communication. The paper shows that the value placed on the language by its speakers – and a number of cultural and economic trends in modern-day Papua New Guinea – are favourable to slowing down the process of impending language shift, and improving the perspectives for language survival.

**Keywords:** Papua New Guinea multilingualism; Manambu survival; Tok Pisin; language ideologies, purism and retention

### 1. Linguistic diversity and language endangerment in the Sepik area of New Guinea

The New Guinea region is the most linguistically diverse and complex area in the world, with over 1,000 languages spoken in an area of about 900,000 square kilometres. Three to four hundred languages spoken there belong to the Austronesian family. Other, non-Austronesian, languages are often referred to as ‘Papuan’ (see Foley 1986: 1–3; Aikhenvald & Stebbins 2007). The term ‘Papuan’ is a rough denomination which covers over sixty genetically unrelated language families and a fair number of isolates in the area.

Within the New Guinea area, the Sepik River Basin (which includes East Sepik and Sandaun Provinces) is, linguistically, the most complex spot within New Guinea.<sup>1</sup> About 200 languages are spoken in this area, a density unparalleled

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1. The Sepik River is the largest river system in Papua New Guinea (with a catchment of 77,700 square kilometres). The river runs 1,126 kilometres from its sources in the mountains to