Linguistic triage: Documentary linguistics and language revitalisation

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Abstract
There has been considerable discussion of the question as to whether a linguist engaged in language documentation should also be involved in language maintenance and revitalisation projects. This begs the question of what qualifications are needed to meaningfully engage in revitalisation and maintenance, and whether a linguist should participate even if they lack them. The relationship of the linguist to the language community has altered significantly in recent years, and yet outdated perceptions of the linguist's role persist. Simultaneously, a new paradigm has emerged wherein there is an expectation on field-working linguists to engage with and contribute to language communities in ways that some fear may interfere with the goal of rigorous linguistic scholarship. This paper will explore the changing expectations of linguistic fieldwork, who is really qualified for revitalisation and maintenance, and how the relationship and responsibilities of the linguist to the community in which they work may impact the way in which language documentation is carried out.

As founder of the Piegan Institute, Darrell Kipp was at the forefront of researching, promoting and developing materials for Native American languages. Possessing more than one master's degree and years of experience in the field, Kipp was well qualified to talk about the state of endangered languages and the process of their revitalisation:

> "Don't hire linguists… They can speak the language, but the kids won't and in bilingual education they still won't. Nothing against linguists, they can talk the language, but they don't act like us. They are not us; they are recorders."
> (Kipp 2000: 192).

Kipp's sentiment emphasises the notion that the linguist is primarily concerned with recording data. At the same time, Kipp refers to linguists as speakers and teachers of language, an idea which Gerdts (2010) considers to be outdated but which persists, nonetheless. Kipp seems here to suggest that linguists are singularly unsuited to participate in maintenance and revitalisation and this attitude reflects a tension that has been present in discourses of language documentation and revitalisation. Kipp's attitude also echoes that of Dorian, who, regarding the revitalisation of an endangered language, said, "such rewards cannot be supplied from the outside, they are to be had from within the social web of the community itself or not at all" (Dorian 1998: 21). This statement reflects the current dominant paradigm in documentation and revitalisation: that it is not only a matter of enlisting the participation of the language community in question but that the language community must, in all respects, take ownership of the endeavour. And yet, as Grenoble and Whaley remind us: "as field linguists and anthropologists know, it is rare to be working on the documentation and description of a potentially endangered language without confronting the issue of revitalisation" (Grenoble & Whaley 2005: 192).

It is clear then, that it is not simply a case of *if* linguists should participate in language revitalisation but rather that linguists *do* participate. The question that might more helpfully be asked is, how can linguists meaningfully contribute to language revitalisation while they are working with language communities. To understand this situation, it is helpful to clarify firstly, what is the purpose of language documentation and what is its relationship to revitalisation. Secondly, it is worth reflecting on how linguists might best approach work on language revitalisation and the issues that arise from those approaches, in particular the role of applied linguists and the particular challenges they face working with endangered or minority languages.

1. Academic Rigour

A good starting point is to consider the question of what the primary focus of documentary linguistics really is. Newman states: "the primary justification for doing research on an endangered language has to be the scientific value of providing that documentation and in preserving aspects of that language and culture for posterity" (Newman 2003: 6). Newman's concern is that excessive focus on servicing the needs of the community, or as he describes it, participating in "social work", detracts from the ability of the linguist to carry out effective, rigorous research. This concern is not unreasonable since for Newman, as for any serious linguist, academic contributions are paramount.

However, it is excessive to argue that social considerations will necessarily diminish the quality of the research. Himmelman, for example, explicitly links language documentation with language maintenance: "Language documentations are not only [seen] as data repositories for scientific enquiries but also as important resources for supporting language maintenance" (Himmelmann 2006: 5). The issue here then is perhaps the fear that considerations of supporting revitalisation efforts might somehow negatively impact the quality of scholarship or perhaps the suggestion that the motivations of language documentation are driven by a kind of saviour complex rather than a desire to produce sound research. Without doubt, the majority of language documenters would surely vigorously reject such a suggestion. As Ameka argues: "Language documenters and theorists strive for the scientifically sound and intellectually sophisticated empiricism that Newman is calling for" (Ameka 2015: 20).

It is in fact disingenuous to express concern that consideration of revitalisation is somehow detrimental to the scientific rigour of language documentation projects when the consensus among documentary linguists themselves is that many documentation project proposals merely "pay lip service to revitalisation" (Hinton 2011). This is echoed by Austin & Sallabank who contend that: "language revitalisation has been seen by some documentary linguists as a simple technical 'add-on' to their research […], rather than as a field of research or activity that requires theoretical or applied knowledge" (Austin & Sallabank 2018: 10). This criticism has been shared by Nathan & Fang who argue that language documentation as a whole does not hold itself accountable for the health of languages and that there are, in fact, urgent human needs arising from language endangerment that must be addressed (Nathan & Fang 2013). The reality is that scientific rigour has remained the primary focus of documentary linguistics, to the detriment of revitalisation rather than the other way around. So, while it is of course the concern of every serious scholar to maintain rigorous standards, it simply isn't the case that factoring

the needs of revitalisation into planning and execution of documentation projects negatively impacts the work.

However, while there is increasing support for the view that language documentation "should involve the community so as to support the maintenance and revitalisation of the language as well as increase its documentary capacity" (Akumbu 2018: 267), it is often the case that the interests of the community and the linguist do not neatly align. Even where the linguist approaches documentation from a revitalisation perspective, the connection between the research and the community's language goals may not immediately be apparent. "Community members are often more interested in revitalisation than documentation, which to them has less obvious immediate benefits" (Austin & Sallabank 2018: 10). It is necessary therefore to consider the underlying assumptions that lead to this misalignment.

2. The embattled linguist

As Newman (2003) discussed, there has been a divergence in recent decades between linguistics and anthropology, disciplines that were previously closely entwined. Gerdts (2010) points out a similar phenomenon whereby linguistics and teaching were formerly much more closely aligned. This is pertinent in two respects: firstly, it demands a reflection on the attitudes of linguists towards fieldwork, and secondly, an examination of the perception that linguists know how to teach language or are interested in learning the language that they are documenting.

While Newman (2003) complains of a dearth of linguists willing to undertake fieldwork, it might be argued that the development of language documentation in the intervening years proves that this was never or is no longer true. It cannot, in all honesty, be claimed that there are no linguists willing to go out in the field, and there are numerous examples of linguists who are also community members for whom fieldwork in their own language is their primary focus. However, Newman's observations about the decline of fieldwork may go some way to explaining negative perceptions of linguists as lacking the right qualifications and being unsuitable for work towards the maintenance and revitalisation. Where the community has the expectation that the linguist should be committed to social fieldwork, with an interest not only in the description of hard linguistic data but all the socio-cultural aspects that accompany it, as might be an anthropologist, linguists may in fact have approached fieldwork simply as a means to complete research for academic purposes and not because of their understanding of or commitment to the language community. Furthermore, Gerdts (2010) suggests that recognition for fieldwork in documentation has been limited and claims that research produced in the field has generally received less acclaim from the wider linguistic field. This would support Newman's claims about the decline of linguistic fieldwork.

Additionally, as language teaching and acquisition have diverged into distinct subfields of linguistics, the field-working linguist lacks motivation or knowledge about how the process of learning and teaching language operates. There remains perhaps a hangover from the days of the missionary school, a favoured haunt of linguists and anthropologists in times gone by. Linguists today however will often be singularly unsuited to this type of work simply due to their academic training and interests, as well as a desire to rebuff any association with missionary work and all the connotations that term brings. Add to

this the common misconception that linguistics means learning languages, and we have a situation where the community may have had false perceptions of the academic outsider. This would give rise to expectations of the linguist which cannot be met and result in attitudes like that of Kipp. Essentially, a situation arises whereby community perceptions of linguists in the field rely on outdated notions of the linguist as anthropologist, teacher and linguist all in one, expected to carry out the function of all three and as a result doing none of them particularly well.

There are of course broader social and political issues which must also be considered, notably the consequences of colonialism, and the extent to which documentary linguists should strive to "decolonise" their work and practice. There is the suggestion that the discipline of language documentation and its introduction of academics into endangered language situations perpetuates colonial inequalities since language documenters bring colonial norms with them through their linguistic training (Leonard 2018). This echoes Ladefoged, who cautions that: "We should always be sensitive to the concerns of the people whose language we are studying. But we should not assume that we know what's best for them" (Ladefoged 1992). Of course, it might equally be argued that minority and endangered language communities often languish under colonial socio-political structures that were imposed on them from the outside and that ignoring them is as equally problematic as engaging with them (Dorian 1998). Newman, however, shares a word of caution with the would-be linguist: "Language policy in fragile multi-ethnic states is not a simple sociolinguistic matter, but rather it is a serious, highly contentious matter in which a foreigner should not become embroiled" (Newman 2003: 6). This warning likewise applies to local linguists, be they part of the community or the wider state which it inhabits, or indeed be legally a foreigner while simultaneously a member of the language community. They too must navigate the prevailing political winds, and often with less protection and fewer means of escape from the ramifications of their work.

3. Documentation isn't revitalisation

It is clear that there are strong arguments in favour of the view that language documentation cannot ignore calls to engage with revitalisation. However, having considered whether or not documentation ought to be driven by revitalisation, and the position of the linguist to it, it must also be noted that methods of documentation and revitalisation often remain quite distinct. The classical outputs associated with documentation such as making audio-visual recordings, producing dictionaries, corpora etc, do not in themselves guarantee successful or meaningful revitalisation or maintenance of a language. Such materials are often not easily accessible to those developing curricula, be that as a result of poor file organisation, inadequate metadata or simply lack of communication between academic and community as to where documented materials will end up. Additionally, the academic and scientific jargon of linguistic analysis and a tendency to focus on classical linguistic features of phonology and morphology are not especially helpful for a teacher attempting to develop communicative competence (Austin & Sallabank 2018). This stems partly from a lack of consideration for pedagogical applications in the planning phase of a language documentation project. As such, the archived materials may not contain the kind of subject matter that is helpful for language acquisition, revitalisation, or maintenance. Topics may often be unsuitable for learners, particularly children, documenting sacred or taboo material, or relating to sex and death (Austin & Sallabank 2018). On top of this,

there is often disagreement within communities and across generations as to what constitutes "proper" language and of who speaks it "nicely" enough to serve as a model for future learners, as well as issues around contending with a lexicon that needs to work in the modern world (Grenoble & Whaley 2005). When these factors combine, the result may be that archived materials sit like specimens under glass in a rarely visited wing of a museum, hardly if ever seen and of no particular use even to those that might be interested in them. This is the complaint of Nathan & Fang (2013) who argue that the process of documentation is a "one way journey" of a language into an archive, ignoring its human characteristics and re-enacting the devalorisation which endangered it in the first place.

4. Applying Linguistics

Further to the discussion of how linguistic outputs can be relevant to revitalisation, Nathan & Fang (2013) complain that pedagogical materials have been weakly fostered by language documentation and generally not encouraged by practice. Hinton observed that "to a large extent, the models, methods and materials for second language teaching and learning are developed by bootstrap strategies within revitalization programs" (Hinton 2011).

The obvious solution seems to lie with applied linguists, however, as Penfield & Tucker make apparent, the applied linguist is not immediately suitable to work in the field since firstly, their training mostly lacks many of the classical tools of linguistics used in documentation (and description) for example comprehensive knowledge of typology or historical linguistics, and secondly, that the majority of scholarship in applied pedagogy is not suitable for an endangered or minority language (Penfield & Tucker 2011). Applied linguistics has an overwhelming focus on dominant and majority languages, such as English, Spanish or Chinese. As Grinevald (1998) cautions, revitalisation is more complicated than simply getting applied linguists out into the field: "Language revitalisation needs to be recognised as a special area of second language acquisition and second language teaching. It is not enough for 'straight' linguists to think that such projects are the domain of educators and applied linguists." (Grinevald 1998: 158).

While research into this area is growing, for example, McPake et al (2017) who carried out a comparative study into professional development for teachers in Maori, Basque, Catalan and Welsh-medium teaching; minority language research in applied linguistics is as yet comparatively underdeveloped. Additionally, there remain two further issues that may not so easily be resolved. Firstly, the research underway is occurring in wealthy states who possess already well-developed scholarship on both majority and minority languages, as is the case with McPake et al. And secondly, the issue that such training alone does not necessarily make an applied linguist suitable for revitalisation of an endangered language.

While there are clearly sound reasons for increased use of applied linguistics and pedagogical methods in language documentation and revitalisation, it must be noted that dominant discourses of pedagogy and second language acquisition rely heavily on both orthography and literacy, which in themselves entail a host of issues for endangered languages. Grenoble & Whaley argue that literacy is in fact not helpful for language diversity because literacy is an arena that requires and thrives on standardised language forms (Grenoble & Whaley 2005). Indeed, they are critical of situations where a well-

meaning applied linguist has attempted to use majority language materials to create educational programmes for minority and endangered languages. This may have the effect of reiterating the same colonial processes that operated to endanger the language in the first place. This is supported by Ameka, who claims that language standardisation does not preserve diversity but rather decreases it (Ameka 2015). Mufwene goes further, stating: "It appears that the development of writing systems for, and literacy in, some endangered languages guarantees not their revitalisation but their (lifeless) preservation in a jar" (Mufwene 2003: 5). With this in mind, the creation of literacy programmes, a standard part of language pedagogy, will not in fact support language revitalisation but instead perpetuate the "one-way journey" into archival obscurity that Nathan & Fang (2013) so strongly protest.

However, it must be noted that a meaningful contribution towards considerations of revitalisation does not solely require the linguist to create an orthography or become an expert in applied linguistics. Nathan & Fang (2013) state that at the planning stage of documentation, consideration of the domains of language should include culturally and socially relevant material that can be used in the development of materials for revitalisation. Nathan & Austin (2004) highlight that a focus on metadata and annotation can yield positive outcomes by increasing its accessibility to those who may not possess the technical linguistic knowledge to deal with it otherwise. Austin & Sallabank comment that: "a more sociolinguistic approach to documentation can identify learner groups, […] as well as potential teachers and consultants and their particular skills" (Austin & Sallabank 2018: 212). So, while calls for more attention to pedagogy and applied methods, in general, are valid, it is not necessarily a requirement for every linguist approaching documentation to acquire training in those areas. It is rather a call for more applied linguists to participate in language documentation projects as well as for a greater focus on minority and endangered language research within the fields of applied linguistics and language acquisition.

5. Conclusions

Reflecting on this discussion, it is clear that there has been extensive debate in the field of language documentation as to the nature of both the discipline and the role of the linguist. While it might be reasonably argued that linguistics as a discipline should be mostly concerned with gathering solid data in order to produce rigorous, scientifically driven analysis, it must be acknowledged that language, as a fundamentally human phenomenon, cannot be divorced from the social reality in which it exists. As such, it demands that fieldworkers and theorists alike operate in accordance with a set of ethics that respects this fact. Indeed, as Ameka made clear, language documentation is not, as Newman (2003) suggests, degraded by this social aspect, but instead has developed frameworks to ensure that it produces meaningful and rigorous data while attending to the ethical demands that accompany it (Ameka 2015).

Additionally, while the dominant paradigms in language documentation have made great efforts to ensure the highest possible standards in the field, there have been continuing criticisms that the practices of linguists have in fact often perpetuated the very causes of language endangerment, be that the reinforcement of colonial inequalities or the reification of languages into artefacts rather than considering them as living, albeit

intangible, entities. In response, there has been an examination of how language documentation might best be re-conceptualised to support and enable revitalisation.

Perhaps most strikingly, it has become clear that there has been a false perception of linguistics and as such linguistic training has lacked adequate focus on applied linguistics that would enable language documentation projects to effectively contribute in the manner that language communities expect. Likewise, it is clear that knowledge of applied linguistics alone is insufficient. Indeed, this simply reiterates the notion that language documentation must become increasingly interdisciplinary and collaborative. While linguistic training in language documentation is becoming increasingly more specialised so that it can produce scientifically rigorous work, as well as promoting a collaborative approach that accounts for and includes the rights and needs of language communities, it remains problematic to simply suggest that language documenters study some applied linguistics courses or vice versa. There remains the issue that applied linguistics brings with it its own set of potentially detrimental effects. These include an emphasis on pedagogy derived from models which are rooted in western concepts of literacy-based knowledge, which itself can operate against language diversity instead of encouraging it.

And yet, while it might seem that there is little support today for the notion that language documentation can operate in isolation from the concept of revitalisation, it must be noted that a lack of rebuttal from linguists is not necessarily a sign of agreement. It is too simplistic to accept linguists' silence on the matter as evidence of agreement or commitment to revitalisation. If a linguist, applied or otherwise, has little or no interest in minority languages or revitalisation, it is doubtful they would feel compelled to enter into a debate on how and why they should include it in their work, let alone make efforts to factor it into their practice. It is, in fact, the language documenters themselves who have made the effort to address the perceived disconnect between documentation and revitalisation. It is their support for revitalisation that presses them to address valid concerns about the scientific rigorousness of data, or about the contentious political and ideological circumstances that surround endangered languages and of the failings of documentation as a discipline to enable meaningful revitalisation and maintenance. And so it remains incumbent on documentary linguists to make noise on this matter, as loudly and as publicly as possible, because to have engaged in a meaningful way with this issue can only lead one to the conclusion: that the linguist can no longer be viewed as the detached researcher operating as a kind of phantom butterfly collector, intent on gathering specimens to put under glass but more as a physician tending to a living, breathing patient whose health is under threat. Documentary linguistics, while imperfect, has thus far operated much like a kind of battlefield medic performing linguistic triage, diagnosing the patient but perhaps not entirely qualified to cure them. However, until specialist pedagogy for endangered and minority languages is more fully developed and applied in the field, a battlefield medic is better than no medic at all.

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