

Book Review: Why Language Documentation Matters (Chelliah 2021)

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1. Introduction

Shobhana Chelliah is well-placed to write a book on language documentation: decades of linguistic fieldwork experience (e.g., Chelliah 2001), co-author of a linguistic fieldwork handbook (Chelliah & Reuse 2010), former Program Director of NSF-DEL (2012-2015), and Director of the Computational Resource for South Asian Languages Archive (CoRSAL). Since the concept of language documentation was first theorized by linguists (Himmelman 1998), there have been several book-length publications and countless articles on the topic. In more recent years, publications on the state-of-the-art in language documentation include two journal articles by prominent linguists (Austin 2016; Seifart et al. 2018) and a special issue of *Language Documentation & Conservation* (McDonnell, Berez-Kroeker & Holton 2018). Unlike those previous publications which were for an academic readership, in her 2021 book, *Why Language Documentation Matters*, Chelliah writes for non-specialists stating that “the purpose of writing this book was not for [those of] us who are already language documenters. It really was for people who know nothing about what we do” (Chelliah et al. 2021).

2. Structure

The book is just under 100 pages and has eight chapters. The first is a four-page introduction. The second chapter “Languages Heal” (26 pages) is the heart of the book. It primarily contains case studies of communities engaging with their language and culture through language documentation projects. The next three chapters are about language endangerment. Chapter 3 “Languages Inform” is an eight-page overview of academic interests in documenting linguistic diversity. Chapter 4 is ten pages on “Reasons for Endangerment”. Chapter 5 “Supporting Linguistic Vitality” (18 pages) covers “a wide range of initiatives that relate to language documentation” (p. 64). Chapter 6 “Methods in Language Documentation and Description” is a 16-page overview of the recording and annotation process with examples of possible outputs and other materials included in a documentation project. Chapter 7 “Linguistic Fieldwork Contributing to Documentation” is a five-page retrospective on historical motivations for describing and documenting languages prior to the language documentation movement. Chapter 8 is a three-page conclusion.

3. Why does language documentation matter? (Chapters 2 & 3)

The strongest answer to the titular question of the book is the second chapter’s compelling stories of how “resources created through documentation serve to link language users to past practices, affirm identity, and support language revitalization and reclamation” (p. 7). It is hard to argue whether language documentation matters when it can be demonstrated that such projects may have a crucial role in promoting human flourishing (Taff et al. 2018) and implementing linguistic rights (Roche 2019) particularly among the most marginalized peoples of the world.

The other reason why language documentation matters is given in the third chapter: “The documentation of language diversity matters because through the study of typologically unique languages we discover the extent and limits of language structure, expected and unexpected patterns of language change, and creative uses of language which highlight the boundaries of language structure” (p. 33). Whether this a compelling motivation rests largely on the interpretation of “we” as inclusive or exclusive, but the language documentation movement was initiated by academics, and was largely motivated by data-centric thinking, like that expressed by Krauss (1992: 8): “Obviously, for scientific purposes, it is most urgent to document languages before they disappear.”

While the more abstract intellectual goals of linguists may have been the catalyst of the language documentation movement, there has arguably been an historic shift to a significantly higher degree of recognition of the social and practical importance of linguistic research. Chelliah (p. 89) reflects on this change:

Our field is progressing from one that pursues purely scientific goals (language science for science’s sake) to societally impactful goals (affirmation of culture and identity through language). This progress has been propelled by Indigenous researchers who, as drivers of the research, disrupt practices that treat a given language as a construct separable from the people who use the language.

This change has been accompanied by increased levels of collaboration, another prominent theme of this book. Linguists interested in the diversity of the world’s languages have always worked with speakers of those languages. The new element is more recognition of the value of community-driven research (p. 18).

Along these lines, Chelliah makes a useful distinction between “language documentation” and “Documentary Linguistics” (p. 2). Language documentation is the activity of creating annotated and accessible records of language. It is an activity done by linguists and non-linguists alike. Documentary Linguistics is a subfield of academia concerned with making linguistic data available to answer scientific questions about the nature of language, and to theorize what it means to create a record of language, and in what manner academic institutions should engage in the language documentation movement now that it has expanded beyond the university.

3. Related issues (Chapters 4-7)

Having discussed the two main motivations for language documentation in Chapters 2 and 3, the remaining chapters cover topics that are somewhat tangentially related to the main topic of the book. For readers unfamiliar with language endangerment, Chapter 4 briefly lays out five reasons why a language might go out of use. Chapter 5 is an eclectic mix of topics. One section explores reasons why it is difficult to measure language endangerment. Another section introduces Ethnologue, Glottolog and the Catalogue of Endangered Languages. Those topics are somewhat removed from the central themes of language documentation, though they are relevant to metadata collection and deciding on priorities in language documentation. A third section introduces language archives and some of the technical challenges creating and maintaining them. The fourth section discusses NSF and ELDP funding—in particular how it has been used for training and creating resources. The fifth section is on language revitalization, the topic suggested by

the title of this chapter. The first two subsections list six types of language revitalization programs, seven relevant types of media, and the final subsection is about the role of linguists in influencing governmental language policy.

Chapter 6 shifts to the “how” of language documentation. The chapter opens with another inspiring story of community-driven language documentation using an MP3 recorder. Video recording is only briefly mentioned. Overall, the book does not really emphasize the importance of video in language documentation (see Ashmore 2014; Seyfeddinipur & Rau 2020). The section on transcription aims to give an impression of the complexity of the transcription task, even introducing the International Phonetic Alphabet, as well as software tools such as ELAN. The section on translation unexpectedly focuses on the process of parsing the morphosyntactic structure and creating interlinear glossing, rather than discussing issues around creating a free translation (e.g., Sasse & Evans 2007). The final section of this chapter lists possible additional elements of a language documentation project, with some discussion of technical issues in creating a dictionary or lexicon.

Chapter 7 shifts the focus to linguistic fieldwork before the conceptualization of language documentation. The first two sections discuss 20th century American linguists and SIL (discussed in more detail by Chelliah & Reuse 2010: 33–77). The final section portrays language documentation as a platform for motivating students of linguistics by bridging the gap between their intellectual pursuits and desire for positive social impact.

4. Uses of this book

Although the book is written for non-specialists, its structure does not have the flow of a popular science book, but rather it feels more like a handbook. The advantage of this structure is that chapters and sections can be read independently of each other, making this an ideal resource for instructors who need updated material for reading assignments at high school, undergraduate or graduate level. Chapter 2 is a relevant introduction to language documentation for students of any type of linguistics or anthropology, as well as students of Indigenous studies or cultural studies. Chapter 4 can stand alone as a brief introduction to language endangerment. Chapter 5, Section 2 can be read as a very short introduction to language catalogues (but see also Drude 2018). The first half of Chapter 6 would give a sense of why the process of language documentation is time-consuming. Chapter 7 works as a very short read on the history of linguistic fieldwork (in North America), but for a fuller treatment of the historical context of documentary linguistics, see Henke & Berez-Kroeker (2016).

While this book is undoubtedly useful as an educational resource, one reason it is unlikely to be read widely by a popular audience is its price (£40 eBook, £50 hard copy). This is an unfortunate obstacle which Chelliah acknowledged at the book launch (Chelliah et al. 2021) and is also planning to address by releasing an open-access publication on this same topic. Popular audiences might also struggle with the description of technical aspects of phonological and morphosyntactic analysis peppered throughout the book. These are introduced with as little jargon as possible to give the reader some taste of this aspect of language documentation, and will no doubt pique the interest of some readers, even if others end up skimming through those paragraphs. As Chelliah suggests (p. 3), the book would be an inspiring introduction to linguistics for a motivated book club or reading group.

5. Final comments

Given the relatively short length of this book, and its intended non-specialist audience, there are, by design, many topics that are either omitted or only superficially treated. However, there are four areas where some additional information would help to contextualize what is discussed in the book. One surprising omission is any mention of the influence of Himmelmann (e.g., 1998; 2006) on the field of language documentation. Granted, the book is not primarily about the history of the field, but Chapter 7 lists many linguists who were influential in the development of linguistic fieldwork, while the one name most commonly associated with the conceptualization of documentary linguistics is conspicuously absent. A second omission is the lack of much discussion of language documentation in the areas of the world with the largest numbers of endangered languages: the Amazon, central Africa, and Southeast Asia. Most of the case studies come from India and Central or North America—essentially, the areas where Chelliah has worked. This is perfectly understandable, but the reader should be aware that the examples given are not a representative sample.

The reader may also want to be aware that there are also two academics cited whose work and ideas are somewhat controversial. The first is Benjamin Whorf (pp. 34-35, 87). Whorf's own ideas and the theories of linguistic relativity based on his work are intriguing and consistently attract the interest of non-specialists, but a passing mention of Whorf's ideas oversimplifies the complexity of the issues (see Bohnemeyer 2020). The second reference that merits further contextualization is the long quote (p. 47) from Peter Ladefoged (1992). In the middle of a book that presents linguists as meaningfully engaging with the communities whose languages they study, it is odd to see an uncritical reference to a paper recommending “professional detachment” and to be “wary of arguments based on political considerations”. For a critical response to Ladefoged (1992), see Dorian (1993) and Romaine (2008).

Overall, *Why Language Documentation Matters* offers a fresh perspective on a movement now in its third decade. The book places the speakers and signers whose languages are being documented at the center of the story, offering a compelling case for the impact of language documentation and an inspiring vision for an academic field that is positioned to use its resources in a way that matters far beyond the lecture halls and libraries of universities.

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