

# Language Documentation: Values, Theories, Practices Summary Report I

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# My perspective

- Primary interest: The technological side of language documentation
- What this means here
  - I have no values
- More precisely: Good “tech. support” for language documentation requires the community, not the technician, to have a clear vision of what they need the technology to do

# Values

- Two (broad) visions
  - Language documentation for linguistics
  - Language documentation for “the larger human community”
- What is this community?
  - All interested people (especially academics)
  - All speakers of a language

# Theories

- The two visions have parallels in two competing theoretical stances in linguistics
  - Linguistics as a historical discipline (the “new” typology)
  - Linguistics as a science
- **Aside:** I noted a lot of discussion of values and practices, but little of theories

# NSF / NEH's take

- Each endangered language embodies unique local knowledge of the cultures and natural systems in the region in which it is spoken.
- These languages are among the few sources of evidence for filling in the record of the human past.
- The great variety of these languages represents a vast, largely unmapped terrain on which linguists, cognitive scientists, and philosophers can chart the full capabilities—and limits—of the human mind.

# Practices

- Two sets of values, two sets of practices
  - Document and develop
  - Describe
- Prototypes
  - Transcribed recordings and “developmental” materials
  - Grammar, dictionary, texts

# Practices

- Documentation for the “human community”
  - Lots of genres
  - “Rich” recordings (e.g., lots of naturalistic video)
  - Collaboration with communities
  - Mobilized resources (linguistics as language development? Is this documentation?)

# Practices

- Documentation for linguistics
  - Focus on creation of the “Holy Trinity”: Grammar, dictionary, text
  - Targeted *description* of linguistically “interesting” features of the language
  - Lots of specialized data formats (e.g., interlinear text, paradigms)



# The good news

- The two sets of values / practices can be complementary
- For example, different genres reveal different grammatical features
- And linguistically-motivated data gathering finds patterns that might otherwise be lost (like Yak-naming conventions)

# The mixed news

- We've also heard that community-linguist interaction can help achieve both goals
- However, I don't think we really understand this very well yet—from a social or a technological perspective
- Should linguists try to be historians, scientists, *and* language developers? Can we be?

# The mixed news

- Take, as an example, **mobilization**
  - Mobilization of language resources is undeniably a good thing
  - Is it the linguist's duty to mobilize resources (which often means creating unarchivable materials)?
  - Or just to produce *mobilizable* resources (or *portable* resources in Bird and Simons' sense)?

# The bad news

- Resources are limited
- In 2005, we cannot be
  - Ideal historians
  - Ideal scientists
  - Ideal educators
- So what should we try to be?

# What should we be?

- I heard compelling arguments that we need to be historians and scientists
- Being good historians causes us to find scientifically interesting things
- Being good scientists helps us decide what to record for history

# What should we be?

- I think we need to think harder about linguist as language developers
- Is it part of the *practice of linguistics* to serve our communities *or*
- Do we serve communities because it's "ethical" *or*
- Do we serve communities because we as individuals value doing this?

# Ethics / Values

- Paraphrasing Michael Krauss...
- Linguistics can be ethical only
  - If it documents languages before they disappear
  - It documents them in a way which helps keep them from disappearing
- Do we all agree?

# Cautionary tale

- It became hard to do documentary work within Australia
- So, the linguists went elsewhere
- With 6,000+ languages to be documented, this seems to be a perfectly rational response...
- ...if we have a responsibility to all humanity not only to speaker communities



# Advice needed

- So, what tools and standards do we need?
- Do we stop at basic recording and transcription tools?
- Do we build tools for scientific research?
- Do *we* build tools to create community resources?
- What kind of training do we need?

# Advice needed

- Of course, our attitudes will evolve over time
- Assuming history, science, and community support are laudable goals but that we can't do it all...
- What do the linguists do now?