Speaking to the Future: Documenting Endangered Languages David Nathan

Who benefits from research? What if that research involves recording personal conversations among some of the world's most vulnerable communities? These are the questions being asked today by linguists working in an emerging discipline concerned with endangered languages known as documentary linguistics.

It is estimated that most of the world's approximately 7,000 languages will not be heard or spoken within three generations from now. That is an extinction rate greater than faced by our planet's flora and fauna under the worst predictions for global warming [1]. Although languages are sometimes extinguished by wars and natural disasters, the most common cause is a gradual decline over one or two generations as a language's communicative or symbolic value is undermined by the various effects of globalization, urbanization, political movements, educational policies, or population movements caused by economic and environmental pressures (including global warming [2]). Spurred into action by the imminent death of so many languages, linguists are now making concerted efforts to document them using techniques both new and old. Today's movement has its roots in work on north American languages by pioneering linguists Edward Sapir and Franz Boas early last century, but the current escalation of activity and interest was triggered by a speech from linguist Michael Krauss in 1992, where he warned that "at the rate things are going, the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind's languages" and asked "what are we linguists doing to prepare for this or to prevent this catastrophic destruction of the linguistic world?" At the same time, many linguists also wanted to roll back their discipline's increasingly narrowing focus on grammatical theory since the 1960s, which had made linguistics look more like an outpost of mathematics or psychology than a humanistic discipline that could map out the diversity of human languages and what people use their languages for. Finally, in the late 1990s, German linguist Nikolaus Himmelmann catalysed the emergence of a new field, documentary linguistics - also called language documentation - whose efforts were at last specifically directed at addressing language endangerment.

Documentary linguistics has few core principles, but, taken together, they represent a thorough departure from "mainstream" linguistics. First, it is centered on data - real data, in the form of recordings of language in use; conversations of all kinds, in normal, everyday social contexts, avoiding the distortions of staging and self-monitoring or other correction. In addition to conversations, linguists attempt to record the entire range of language events, from songs and rituals to the speech of children. Second, language documenters want to "make sense" of the data, to ensure that their work resides not only in recordings of talk and song (valuable though they will be to the speakers themselves, of course), but also in ways to recast those recordings through transcriptions and interpretations so that others will have a window into their meanings. Third, documentary linguistics has an ethical, participatory flavor; rather than re-enact the colonialist "we" study "them" research methods of the past, documenters work together with language speakers, communities are recognized as partners in the enterprise and receive some of the benefits of the research.

Today, documentary linguistics is gaining increasing momentum and recognition. Funding sources, graduate courses, advocacy organizations, and publications are devoted to nurturing language documenters and their crafts. Several digital archives specialize in curating and disseminating the outcomes of documentation work [3]. My own organization, the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, based at SOAS, University of London [4], uniquely combines the largest international funding source for language documentation [5] together with an archive and educational program. The educational program [6] trains graduate students in the linguistic, technical, and practical aspects of spending enough time in often remote village settings to learn and document the languages spoken there an archive, while the archive [7] ensures that documentation materials will survive long after the languages have gone quiet.

The new discipline's activities are not restricted to academic research and publication; they range from supporting local language revitalization efforts among the Rama people in Nicaragua [8, 9], to an "urban initiative" recording and linguistically analyzing stories amongst refugee diasporas in New York [10], to global sharing of hip hop songs in the Aka language of Arunachal Pradesh, India on YouTube [11]. In fact, you can find a myriad of websites; see, for example, *Online Resources for Endangered Languages*, with over 400 links to web resources on revitalising or documenting endangered languages.

Despite becoming accepted as a main component of mainstream linguistics, language documentation is recently facing some major questions. If you attend its conferences, or read its latest blogs and journals, you will detect two deep tensions. The first revolves around the question of what distinguishes it from conventional linguistics: attention to the diversity and value of languages, or the availability of new technologies such as ever smaller (and better) audio recorders and camcorders? Colette Grinevald, for example, believes that "the technological part" is receiving more than its share of attention [12]. However, both are essential; the precise balance between them is less important than the choice of technologies deployed, and how outcomes are therefore directed in different directions - which leads to the second and greater tension. Documentary linguists are indeed fortunate to have at their disposal technologies that were until very recently unavailable or unaffordable. These technologies fall into two categories which correspond to a growing tension between two constituencies: media technologies and information technologies. Those in the media camp see ever greater value in making and high quality, compelling recordings, using the internet to share documentation with communities, and to channel resources towards supporting and revitalizing languages. On the information technology side are those who gain more value from access to those recordings - or, to be more precise, coded transcriptions of them - as language "data" that can be computationally compared, collated, and analysed to inform new theories.

Documentary linguistics has come a long way. It has shown a wider public the scale of language diversity as well as the threats to it. There is a new generation of highly trained and motivated documenters, equipped with the tools and knowledge to face the challenge of massive global language loss. However, twenty years have elapsed since Michael Krauss warned that linguists may see their object of study disappear under their own watch, and yet few if any have claimed any effective countermeasures to language loss. In what is surely a healthy sign of a maturing

discipline, fundamental tensions are breaking out. For documentary linguistics, the new departures may come from within.

[1] Krauss, Michael. 1992. The world's languages in crisis. *Language* 68:6-10.

[2]

http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/11/04/inuit.eskimos.greenland.language/index.html

[3] http://elar.soas.ac.uk/, http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES,

http://lacito.vjf.cnrs.fr/archivage/presentation_en.htm,

http://www.ailla.utexas.org/site/welcome.html,

http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~survey/archive/the-collection.php

- [4] http://www.hrelp.org
- [5] http://www.hrelp.org/grants
- [6] http://www.hrelp.org/courses
- [7] http://elar.soas.ac.uk
- [8] http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/nicaragua/language-rights-nicaraguan-atlantic-coast
- [9] http://www.ailla.utexas.org/search/view_resource.html?dep_id=371&dtype=I
- [10] http://endangeredlanguagealliance.org/
- [11] http://www.youtube.com/enduringvoices#p/u/3/7epBWBzjjdY
- [12] Grinevald, C. 2006. Encounters at the brink: linguistic fieldwork among speakers of endangered languages. In *The Vanishing Languages of the Pacific Rim*. Chapter 3. Osahito Miyaoka, Osamu Sakiyama, and Michael E. Krauss (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 36-76. Online at http://www.ddl.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/fulltext/Grinevald/Grinevald_2007_Linguistic%20fieldwork.pdf