

Foreword

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Endangered Languages and Languages in Danger: Issues of documentation, policy, and language rights

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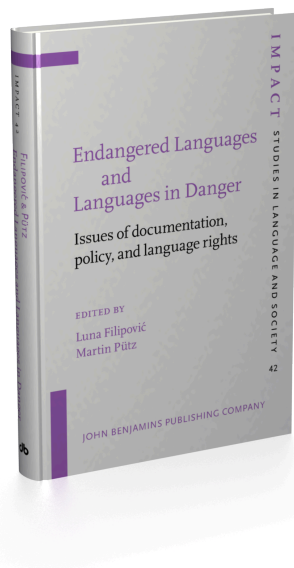
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Foreword

There is general consensus among linguists and language experts that slightly more than 7,000 languages (Ethnologue 2015)¹ are spoken by 7 billion people around the world today and that half of them are under threat of extinction within fifty to one hundred years, a dramatic change in human history. Today at least 3,000 mainly indigenous or local languages are endangered, seriously endangered or dying in many parts of the world. Our planet seems to exhibit an astonishing ratio of speakers to their languages: 97% of the world's people speak about 4% of the world's languages (UNESCO 2003).

This information informs the premise of the current volume because it focusses our attention on two facets of interest here: endangered languages and languages in danger. We believe it is important to make this distinction and address both themes in a holistic approach. *Endangered languages* are those that are moving towards extinction, for a variety of reasons that our contributors discuss, mainly related to diminishing sizes of speaker populations, lifestyle changes and other socio-economic and political factors. *Languages in danger*, on the other hand, refers to the circumstances that create a disadvantaged position for speakers of certain languages when they find themselves within another linguistic environment that speaks a different, majority language. Some of our contributions point out the issues that need to be raised in this context since, technically, many languages, or more precisely their speakers, can find themselves in danger, which can then lead to inequality and injustice. Interestingly, we show that the size of the speaker population does not matter when it comes to languages in danger. Specifically, even speakers of a very populous language can find themselves in danger because of their language within countries where their language is not spoken, thus requiring translation-mediated communication. This status creates a number of barriers for such speakers and may result in serious negative consequences for those speakers. The common thread of argumentation in this volume is that we need to study all the roles that languages and their respective statuses in different contexts play when it comes to social interactions in our multilingual world and the need for peaceful co-existence amidst linguistic and cultural

1. The most recent web edition of the *Ethnologue* (2015, 18th edn.) contains information on 7,102 known living languages.

diversity. We hope that the current volume sets out directions for current and future explorations in this vein. The volume examines the causes behind this dramatic loss of linguistic diversity, why this is an issue, how processes of language shift are triggered and what can be done and achieved to document and support endangered, moribund and small languages especially in the context of an ever increasing globalized world. Some of the questions posed in the present volume are, amongst others: How can a minority/indigenous language be maintained in this era of globalization, what are the main reasons for language shift, what do we lose when languages die and what is the role of language policy and planning strategies in multilingual contexts? And finally, what are the benefits of documenting and archiving endangered languages for linguistics, related disciplines and our human cultural heritage in general, especially in the light of new advances in technology and methods of data collection? In this vein, the context of language shift, language threat and loss in multilingual situations are explored, with all the challenges and consequences involved. These are discussed from a variety of perspectives: sociolinguistics, anthropology and the sociology of language including language contact, language ecology, language policy/planning, language rights, and language documentation.

The collection of contributions included in this volume was originally presented at the *36th International LAUD Symposium* on Endangered Languages, which took place on March 31 – April 3, 2014 at the University of Koblenz-Landau (Landau campus). The chapters included for publication here are a small selection from those presented at the conference. A second collection of papers stemming from the same conference was edited by Martin Pütz and Neele Mundt (2016) and is entitled “Vanishing Languages in Context: Ideological, Attitudinal and Social Identity Perspectives” (Peter Lang).

We are indebted to many who have helped us in compiling this volume and whom we hereby acknowledge. First of all, thanks are due to the many internationally well-known conference contributors for their stimulating discussions in a very pleasant atmosphere and to the authors in the present volume, who have responded with professionalism to all the requests that have been made of them. Furthermore, we would like to express our gratitude to the external reviewers who dedicated their time and expertise to reviewing the papers and who gave constructive feedback to the authors. We thank the Series editors, Ana Deumert and Kristine Horner, for the very useful comments on all the chapters. Our gratitude also goes to the excellent John Benjamins production team, in particular Kees Vaes and Patricia Leplae, who never kept us waiting for an answer to a question or a solution to a problem.

We would not have been able to organize this conference successfully without the assistance of some of the Landau students, especially Conny Fink, Freya Hemesoth and Tim-Oliver Paul, whose enthusiasm and dedication were a source of enormous support which contributed to the success of the Symposium.

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