Preface

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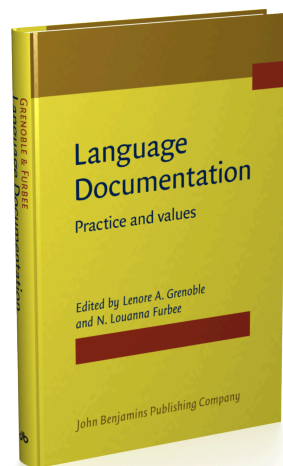
Preface*

N. Louanna Furbee and Lenore A. Grenoble

The papers in this volume stem from a collaboration of several years sponsored by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) and funded by the National Science Foundation. At the request of the Society, scholars involved in the documentation and archiving of endangered languages engaged in discussions among themselves on issues arising in this new field in the profession. Among their activities, they planned a conference on these topics, which was held during the LSA Linguistic Institute at MIT/Harvard in 2005. Originating in that conference, this book presents a statement about the content and conduct of language documentation at a turning point in its development, when it only recently has become a recognized area in linguistics. The volume is organized around position papers and case studies that identify and illustrate existing possibilities and inadequacies, as well as desirable directions for the growth of the enterprise. We believe that the book should be seen both as a characterization of challenges afforded by language documentation at this point in time and as a set of informed suggestions for directions to be pursued.

1. The origin of this book

In 2004 the LSA asked its archivist, Louanna Furbee, to convene a group of specialists working in the area of language documentation of endangered languages

in order to consider the proper role of the Society in this rapidly developing field. Since the LSA did not and does not sponsor technical archiving projects, it has no vested interest in any specific formulation or approach. It was therefore an appropriate entity to encourage the sharing of solutions and intellectual advances with respect to the creation and use of archived materials, to facilitate exchanges on ways to revive languages, to stimulate theoretical advances using archival materials, and to encourage a variety of promising directions of research.

2. The conversations and conference

2.1 Participants

The group of specialists engaged in these considerations represented the stakeholders in the emerging activity of language documentation of endangered languages, such as major archiving projects and electronic repositories for endangered languages, funding agencies, standards-setting initiatives, training programs, indigenous communities, and the LSA Committee on Endangered Languages and Their Preservation. Initially numbering 21 people,[1] the group of participants became known as the LSA Conversation on Endangered Languages and Their Archiving, or simply the "conversationalists" or the "conversation group." Over the next few years, a significant number of people joined the original conversation group and added their perspectives and expertise. All these people donated their time and talents, and what they accomplished was a notable

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1. The participants in the first conversation in Oakland and the institutions they represented were Anthony Aristar (LINGUIST List; Electronic Metastructure for Endangered Languages Data), Helen Aristar-Dry (LINGUIST List; Electronic Metastructure for Endangered Languages Data), Peter K. Austin (Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project and Endangered Languages Archive), Arienne M. Dwyer (Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen/Documentation of Endangered Languages), Victor Golla (Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas), Jeff Good (Open Language Archives Community), Lenore A. Grenoble (Linguistic Society of America), Alice Harris (LSA Committee on Endangered Languages and Their Preservation), Jim Herbert (National Endowment for the Humanities; National Science Foundation), Heidi Johnson (Digital Endangered Languages and Musics Archive Network; Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America), Martha J. Macri (Terralingua; the Cherokee Tribe of North Carolina), Joan Maling (National Science Foundation), Nicholas Ostler (Foundation for Endangered Languages), Margaret Reynolds (Linguistic Society of America), Gary Simons (Summer Institute of Linguistics), Nick Thieberger (Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures), Doug Whalen (Endangered Language Fund), Tony Woodbury (Center for Indigenous Languages of Latin America), Akira Y. Yamamoto (Linguistic Society of America), Annie Zaenen (Palo Alto Research Center), and N. Louanna Furbee, convener (Linguistic Society of America).

form of volunteer activism within a profession, inspired by concerns about "doing" linguistics the right way for the right reasons at a time that presented the challenges and opportunities of starting a new direction in the profession. The following outlines that history and describes the goals and contents of this book.

2.2   The LSA conversations

Throughout the autumn of 2004, the original group of conversationalists engaged in spirited electronic exchanges concerning their charge, concluding with a set of preliminary papers, statements, and topics that constituted the agenda for their first face-to-face meeting. That first conversation took place January 5 and 6, 2005, prior to the LSA Annual Meeting in Oakland, California. At that time, the group identified three roles appropriate for the Society to take as a professional organization interested in the archiving of endangered languages – those of Educator, Facilitator, and Ombudsperson-Ethicist. They also produced a set of action items and planned the conference whose papers formed the origin of this book – the "Conference on Language Documentation: Theory, Practice, and Values," July 9–11, 2005, at the MIT/Harvard Linguistic Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts – where these topics could be given wider consideration.

Appropriate roles for the LSA

Some specifics for each role that were deemed appropriate by the conversationalists included:

- *Educator*
    - Educate student, avocational, and professional linguists in the emerging technologies and archiving choices and possibilities – through institutes (courses, workshops, lectures, topical conferences); through "extension" efforts (electronic/Web-based tutorials, reference guides, etc.), through mentoring relationships, and through special sessions at the LSA Annual Meeting.
    - Encourage and create public education opportunities and programs.
    - Implement programs in ethical conduct of archiving activities.
    - Monitor development of new directions in research from these archiving initiatives likely to be important to linguistic theory and practice (e.g., in ontology and typology) and move promptly to promote discussion and dissemination of innovations throughout the profession.

- *Facilitator*
    - Promote transparency and cross-translation of systems and agreement on common-use categories.
    - Enhance relations among stakeholders (speaker and nonspeaker inheritors of heritage languages, linguists, funding agencies, general public, and archiving entities).
    - Communicate on a regular basis with the community of linguists about needs.
- *Ombudsperson-Ethicist*
    - Conduct regular "conversations" with active archiving participants and leaders about issues of concern (long-term funding, location and authority of the repository, transparency, translatability, interoperability).
    - Serve as ombudsperson for linguists who are nonspecialists in archiving to those who are specialists and vice versa.
    - Be prepared to act in good-faith mediation efforts among the various stakeholders.

3.   The conference on language documentation: Theory, practice, and values

As noted, one of the outcomes of the conversation group was the decision to organize a conference on endangered languages and their documentation in conjunction with the LSA Summer Institute in 2005 at MIT and Harvard, a year that saw the launch of the Ken Hale Chair in Field Linguistics and the commitment of the Institute to host a summer field-methods course. The timing was not planned, nor was it totally arbitrary and coincidental, as both events captured a growing sentiment in the linguistic community that we need to do more about language endangerment, beginning with defining what that "more" should be.

The Conference was offered as an Institute Workshop and presented papers within six broad topics: (1) the requirements of field linguistic training; (2) the concerns and involvement of the heritage language communities; (3) the question of what is adequate documentation; (4) the uses of documentation in speaker communities; (5) training and careers in field linguistics; and (6) ethics and archiving best practices. Yet it was notable that, as presented, nearly all the papers seemed to be concerned with ethical practice, whether these involved questions of how best the values of the heritage language communities might be given full consideration in the documentation of a language, ethical considerations involved in best practices for preparation and conservation of materials, problems of outsider access to sensitive materials sometimes expressed by communities, or the loss of intellectual resources perceived by linguistic scholars denied access to

materials by communities. Throughout the conference, the best ways to conduct all aspects of this enterprise emerged as a central concern.

These concerns about values emerged again during a conference event, "Extending the LSA Conversation on Archiving Endangered Languages," which formed a final session of the conference on July 11, 2005, and which included about half of the original conversationalists, plus several other conference participants. The second conversation elaborated on the initial suggestions of the first and set up interest groups to prepare suggestions to be offered to relevant LSA entities. Since the conversation group was ad hoc and had no structural standing within the Society, the groups considering these issues prepared resolutions and reports destined to be offered as only advisory to various committees of the LSA.

The interest groups collaborated throughout the next six months via electronic conversations. They then reported back at the 2006 LSA Annual Meeting, January 5–8, 2006, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, when the conversation group met in an open town meeting for a third and last time before handing over their suggestions to the relevant LSA committees. They reported to the Committee on Endangered Languages and Their Preservation, the Committee on Computing, and the Executive Committee. Suggestions ranged from resolutions such as one supporting the International Year of Languages, and another urging acceptance of documentary studies of endangered languages as appropriate topics for dissertations, to quite meaty and sometimes controversial works on issues such as (1) the state of the field for endangered language documentation; (2) linguistics, the public sector, and the documentary team, and (3) enhancing creative interactions among scholars, avocationalists, and students.

4. Conclusion

The "Conference on Language Documentation: Theory, Practice, and Values" examined issues that the process of language documentation raises for linguists, heritage speakers, and their respective communities. It attempted to set directions for aspects of the documentary enterprise (e.g., collaborations, appropriate training of field linguists, ethical issues, the documentary linguists' role in language revitalization efforts), as well as to present case histories of attempts at documentation and approaches to documentation and training. At the end of the workshop, there were two summary events for these public sessions: a summary of the important issues raised in papers and posters presented to participants by two "scribes" (Jeff Good and Doug Whalen), and a discussion of issues arising from the conference that had relevance to the Conversation on Endangered Languages Archiving held the next day.

Many of the papers in this volume originated as posters or talks presented at that workshop. They have been reworked to fit the themes of the volume, focusing on key issues that emerged from the original topics that the conversation group identified – the role of technology in documentation; the push among linguists, activists, and community members to jointly define language documentation and revitalization projects; and, above all, the ethical and moral issues underlying all of this work.

The contributors to the volume range from seasoned linguists to undergraduate students, as well as to dedicated activists and community members, who all share a sense of commitment and enthusiasm for the hard work of language documentation. Although they present many perspectives, their works all exhibit a preoccupation with the ethical practice of language documentation. As those persons labor to save languages that are endangered, or at least save a persistent and useable record of them, they are more concerned with the impact of the manner of their work than many of their predecessors have been. This preoccupation makes their suggestions especially interesting since many offer truly original ways of incorporating and accommodating the interests of the communities who speak or once spoke these languages.

We feel fortunate as individuals to be involved in a small way in the movement to document and revive endangered languages. The activity offers many novel avenues of intellectual understanding of language that contribute new perspectives to current theories. For those reasons, participants feed both their intellectual curiosity and their altruistic needs.

The authors hope this volume will again extend the LSA Conversations on endangered languages and their archiving, continuing the creative engagement of the participants who helped to create it – all the conversationalists, all the conference participants, and all those who prepared postconference papers to situate and orient the sections.[2]

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2. In this last group are Anna Berge, N. Louanna Furbee, Donna B. Gerdts, Jeff Good, Lenore A. Grenoble, Martha J. Macri ("Language Documentation: Whose Ethics?"), Judith M. Maxwell, and Keren Rice.