

## Language revitalization or language fossilization?

Some suggestions for language documentation from the viewpoint of interactional linguistics

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At the DOBES training course organized by the MPI in Nijmegen (Netherlands) last year, I noted a lack of consideration concerning linguistic interaction. It seems that little has changed since the time some 30 years ago when Spolsky lamented that most students of endangered languages were merely interested in describing and analyzing phonetics, morphology or grammar. Wright calls such perspective “language as system” as opposed to “language as practice”, stressing the importance of the latter for linguistic research. Talking with other participants, I could not help noticing that they showed little interest in mundane interactional data between, for instance, speakers of different generations. Rather, the main emphasis lay on documenting a local language by eliciting data through interviews or story-telling. The notion of an ideal speaker and language as a homogeneous and monolithic object of contemplation seemed to be lurking prominently in the background. From the viewpoint of interactional linguistics (Selting & Couper-Kuhlen), a change of perspective in endangered language documentation and analysis appears desirable. Empirical interactional data, in any given natural setting, abound in situated meanings, patterns of language use, language attitudes and cultural knowledge.

My presentation will briefly introduce some methods of interactional linguistics and then consider how these could contribute to an analysis of endangered languages as practice. In the empirical part, an excerpt of intergenerational communication in Okinawa will be analyzed. Identifying some characteristics of the choice between Japanese, Ryukyuan (*Uchinaaguchi*) and Ryukyuan Japanese (*Uchinaa Yamatoguchi*) especially by the younger generation, it is suggested that intergenerational activities should be the object of “documentation for revitalization” (Grenoble & Whaley) more often. Documentation and promotion of such activities could activate the younger generation’s awareness about their heritage language and local identity. In addition, it enables them to understand various situated meanings and helps them to acquire cultural knowledge through interaction. The documentation and analysis of such interactional data helps researchers as well as activists in the field to identify crucial factors involved in successful transmission of local languages; that is a prerequisite for language maintenance planning.

### Reference:

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