

Dying to be counted: The “Audit Culture” of Documentary Linguistics

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As a result of the endangered languages movement, basic documentary work is regaining legitimacy in linguistics. Emerging are new training programs, publications, positions, and, above all, funding initiatives that emphasize fieldwork, corpus creation (i.e., transcription, annotation, and translation), grammar writing, archiving, and community language development. The academic value of small, minority, and other peripheral languages is no longer exhausted by their bearing on linguistic theory (Austin and Simpson 2007).

Yet alongside the new humanistic awareness that each language is an “intellectual achievement” (LSA 1994) which its speakers have a right to enjoy and maintain (LSA 1996), new reductionist discourses have also arisen (Heller and Duchêne 2007) that compare languages in value, particularly in competitive and programmatic contexts such as grant-seeking and standard-setting. Documentary linguists now pose questions that would be inconceivable to ask about major languages, like “how much documentation is enough?” (CELP discussion paper 2007). They find themselves having to play a “numbers game” in which languages are prioritized by the weakness of their speaker base and their “degree of endangerment,” using official metrics and scales sanctioned by UNESCO. Research plans are framed around the archival materials to result, a development Nathan (2004) has called “archivism”: quantifiable properties such as recording hours, data volume, and file parameters; and technical desiderata like “archival quality” and “portability” have become commonplace reference points in assessing language documentation projects (Bird and Simons 2003, E-MELD School of Best Practice).

New commodifying practices have arisen as well. Linguists’ obligations to their field communities are now often formulated in terms of the transaction of objects like language primers, CDs, and subtitled videos, rather than through language maintenance objectives or achievements. Linguists’ relationships to consultants are distilled in letters of support demanded by granting bodies as *bona fides*, creating a trade in written documents that can have political consequences as projects evolve (Grinevald 2006). Endangered languages are even finding a place in the business model of private corporations; Rosetta Stone, for example, now has a department devoted to producing language learning software for this newly profitable market niche (<http://www.rosettastone.com/en/endangered-languages>).

There is thus a growing disconnect between the avowed values of the field and the systems that organize documentary research. A “common objectifying thrust” can no doubt be found in language study from early colonial situations onward (Errington 2001:34). But the reductionist discourses and commodifying practices prevalent in contemporary documentary linguistics derive from two forces particular to our time. One of these is digitization, which requires language data to be formalized and standardized if it is to realize its promise of making the information easily searchable and widely accessible. The other is Euro-American “audit culture” (Strathern 2000), in which accountability, quantification, and competitive ranking are pervasive. Appreciating the impact of these forces will enable us to envision alternative approaches to language preservation that better correspond to the humanistic conception of all languages as inherently valuable, thereby bringing documentary work into closer alignment with the values of the field, rather than being dictated by rising digital paradigms and bureaucracy.

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