

A pan-dialectal approach to language documentation: the Wik languages of Cape York Peninsula, Australia

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The 'representativeness' and 'quality' of a language sample have been suggested as key criteria for corpus planning in language documentation work (Himmelman, 2002; Lehmann, 2001). However, identifying what a representative and quality selection of language data should include raises significant methodological issues in relation to the Wik languages of Cape York Peninsula (CYP), Australia.

The Wik languages are closely related Middle Paman language varieties spoken on the western coast of CYP. Although the fourteen named Wik varieties share similar lexicon and structure, there is significant dialectal and intra-dialectal variation. Language, clan and country are extensively interrelated in this region producing a highly linguistically-oriented culture where older speakers are typically polyglots and language-switching and translation are part of everyday interactions (Sutton, 1978).

In this seminar I will discuss the development of a pan-dialectal documentation model to record the northernmost coastal Wik language, Wik-Ngatharr. Taking a pan-dialectal approach as utilised by Evans (2003) allows dialect variants and their sociolinguistic use to be understood in relation to the identification and description of an underlying 'deeper' language system (Evans, 2003: xxii). Application of this approach to language documentation requires addressing the methodological and practical issues of collecting a 'representative' and 'quality' language corpus, what it should include, and how it can be utilised for varied stakeholders.

References

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