

Endangered language linguistics: Whose mission?

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In current endangered language work, “engagement” and “activism” mean many different things—collaborating with speakers on community-based projects, advocating for political reform, raising public awareness of threats to language vitality, etc. In this paper, the consciousness raising project is directed at the discipline of linguistics itself. The simple proposition I take as a starting point is one that most linguists have come to simply take for granted: that there are deep, institutionalized dependencies between academic linguistics on the one hand, and Christian missionary organizations (most notably SIL International) and their products on the other. But given the significant divergences in academic and mission agendas, the time has come for us to ask ourselves whether it is necessary or desirable for field linguistics—and hence the core of the endangered languages paradigm—to continue to rely as it does on mission-based tools, infrastructure, and information. I raise this difficult issue in the interest of seeing a stable and responsible future for basic linguistic research at a historical juncture when language documentation is of greater importance than perhaps ever before.