

## **Endangered Language Support: to Do or to Be?**

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FEL has now existed for twelve years, its mission “to support, enable and assist the documentation, protection and promotion of endangered languages”. I reflect on outcomes to date, on FEL’s struggle to offer real value somewhere in the interstices between lack of resources, logical impossibility and moral ambivalence.

Language endangerment is widely recognized as a double tragedy, for the world of knowledge, and also for community traditions and self-identity. Addressing the former would require serious funds for documentation, funds that FEL does not have; luckily some others do. Addressing the latter directly would require intervention by outsiders, which is of doubtful feasibility when it comes down to speaking a language, and in any case ethically dubious; luckily there is autonomous concern, now emerging worldwide, within communities.

Direct action on a large scale, then, has been ruled out for us. Our grants, if well-subscribed and increasing steadily in value, have remained modest. But this does not make FEL valueless. Those beginning to be concerned about the state of their own language are often heartened when they discover that FEL exists: and it can act – through its newsletter, its conferences and its proceedings – as a signpost to others’ activities, all over the world. Its very existence has helped to build a positive solidarity among communities, as well as paths to relevant expertise (in linguistics, IT, pedagogy, policy). But it has neither the right, nor the competence, to lay down a strategy for others to overcome language endangerment.

There are unanswered questions, which point the way towards a new potential role for FEL in its second dozen years. How to engage, and channel, the hitherto impotent enthusiasm of members of large language communities? How to present the speakers of small language communities, amid the dominance of world languages, as models of a rich way of life? Multilingualism is truly a profusion of wealth, a cornucopia of possibility. But it is a hard gift to give to others.