

Sustaining the fieldworker

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Since the early days of language documentation, the focus of attention has been on the speakers of endangered languages on the one hand, and on the data collected on the other hand. While the relationships with endangered language communities and the sensitivity to their concerns are as important as the issue of curation of volatile data in the digital age, both have increased the pressure on fieldworkers to be held responsible for the development of sustainable relations both with speakers and with their own data. For instance, although most funding agencies do not fund language revitalisation activities, they do expect the outcomes of documentation to be relevant for the speech community. In analogy, funds for an ongoing curation of data are more difficult to obtain than grants for the collection of new data; yet, fieldworkers are assumed to administer access rights, add annotations, or even update data formats long after the lifespan of their grant has ended.

In addition to addressing these issues, my talk identifies further issues of great relevance for sustainability in language documentation from the perspective of the fieldworker. The first issue regards the relationship of researchers with funding agencies prior, during, and after funding. Most funding agencies follow a strict responsive mode, in not seeking out potential applicants or identifying areas of particular interest, and allowing little or no assistance in project design, preparation, data collection, networking, etc. I argue that this policy is not optimal for language documentation, where the combination of skills that are at once rare and very specific regarding the necessary language competence and the linguistic, social and health profiles means that a language may remain undocumented unless one specific researcher is put in a position to work on it. At the institutional level, fieldworkers likewise receive very little support to sustain their fieldwork activities, which are often seen as a mere add-on to the "normal" teaching, desk-based research and administrative activities. To top this catalogue of complaints, fieldworkers are treated as lone wolves by most granting bodies: funds for visits from or to family while in the field, to cover childcare expenses, etc. are either not available or have to be met within the often tight budget limits for field grants.

In this talk, I will make a number of suggestions for concrete actions to create a sustainable relationship with fieldworkers (and of fieldworkers to their data and the communities they work with) that goes beyond the rhetorical level and maximises the potential for a long-lasting positive impact of the funds invested in language documentation.