

Record Levels of Research Funding for Endangered Languages

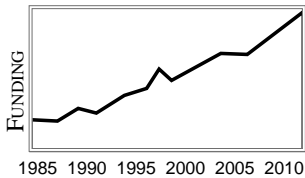
The endangered languages agenda has brought substantial changes to the field of linguistics, with small, minority, and peripheral languages now valued even beyond their bearing on linguistic theory.

Thanks to the use of emotive and moralistic rhetorical strategies, and digital technologies, linguists are now set to save these languages.

Large funding initiatives now support fieldwork, documentation, grammar writing, archiving, and community language development.

The past decade has also seen new degree programs, training courses, publications, and academic positions in endangered languages.

Opportunities to save a language now abound.



Classifieds

HEARTS LOST AND FOUND

Linguist, male, 30s, seeking language consultant aged 70-95, looking for short term exchange, will consider long term relationship.

PERFORMANCES

Live at Carnegie Hall —
ALAN and the Annotations

Hear the rhythms of typologically unpredicted segments and a previously undescribed tone system!

Endangered Languages – Dying to be Counted

Linguists Warn of Language Extinction

EXPERTS: ‘90% of Earth’s languages are vulnerable’

Most of the world’s 6,912 languages will have died out by the end of the century, experts predicted yesterday. Linguists issued fresh warnings about the perilous position of the thousands of languages spoken by adults but increasingly rarely by their children and grandchildren. ‘Ninety per cent of languages today are spoken by less than 100,000 people and are very vulnerable,’ says linguist Dr Max ... *Continued on Page 84*

Scientists Discover Smallest Language

Using the latest geo-linguistic statistical techniques and OntoGIS metadata, Necro-linguistics Institute researchers have located the world’s smallest language. The Ugh language (ISO 639-4-zzz) occupies the least space on the earth’s surface and therefore has the highest linguo-population density of any tongue. During the coming summer, in fly-in fly-out fieldwork, researchers will investigate structural correlates of this astounding finding.

New Technology to Explore Language Loss

By Gus Vendredi
CHRONICLE SCIENCE WRITER

NASA, Microspiel and the Spaghetti Phone Foundation announced today a joint venture to develop new technologies and undertake a daring experiment. Specially prepared high resolution digital recordings of Homer’s Iliad translated into 47.6 of the world’s most endangered languages will be uploaded to the International Space Station and played into the vacuum of space to investigate the effects of languages being uttered to no listeners at all.

Today’s TV

- 10:00 *The Wizard of Ugh* (1939). New print in archive-quality color.
- 12:10 *Cooking with Gus*. Bake delicious eksamel cookies using best practise ingredients.
- 1:00 *Newsdesk* with Prof. Bob Pixel (analogue transmission only).
- 1:01 *The Strange Case of the Ugh*. Detective story, searching for nominal values.
- 3:15 *Mastermind*. Dr Lynne Quist asks tongue-twisting questions and seeks the ultimate prize.
- 4:10 *Crouching Velar, Hidden Nasal*. Foreign, 10% subtitled. Martial articulations.

Editorial

There is a tension between the moral agenda that motivates endangered language work and the way that agenda has been operationalized. Even as a lofty discourse brings endangered languages into focus, linguists’ efforts to preserve languages has led to their commodification.

‘Degree of endangerment’ is assessed using deceptively precise measures like UNESCO’s nine-parameter ‘endangerment index’. The aims and outcomes of documentary projects are formulated as quantified technical properties of the archive to result, such as recording hours, data volume, and file formats. Linguists’ obligations to their field communities are discharged through transacted objects like language primers, CDs, subtitled videos, and official letters of support.

Rather than approaching language endangerment with the technocratic standards of their own culture, linguists should strive to be more responsive to what is distinctive about each language and the particular needs of each speaker community. Only by doing so can documentary linguistic practice be brought into alignment with its moral stance.

CHRONICLE
CARTOON



Now showing:

RAIDERS OF THE LOST TROPE

Tickets available only online in IMDb format.

Dying to be counted: commodification of endangered languages in documentary linguistics

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1. Endangered languages discourse – slogans like: “a language dies every two weeks – what are we going to do about it?” (Dalby 2002) and “without linguistic diversity it would be impossible for us to perform the central task of linguistic science, ie. developing a realistic theory of language competence” (Hale 1998) have been remarkably effective in emotive and moral terms in promoting a new linguistic ideology, ie. preservation of treasures in danger of being lost. Large research funders have emerged (e.g. NSF, Volkswagen, Rausing), and student interest has been raised, but the responses from linguistics have been marked by commodification.

2. Commodification – reduction of languages to **things** and their treatment as if they were a **tradeable commodity**, arising from the forces of objectification, standardisation and audit that shape the management of information in contemporary Western culture, especially academic culture with its focus on outputs and counting (e.g. publication counts, citation indices, research impact statements etc). It also results from a theoretical and methodological vacuum that has been filled not by linguists but by preservationists, archives and technologists who have promoted aspects of the ‘audit culture’. Commodification is found as the transformation of languages into indices, bounded objects, technical encodings, and exchangeable goods:

2.1 **Languages as indices** – language vitality indicators (e.g. UNESCO’s 9 criteria with 6 scoring levels) objectify language: the vitality of an individual language can be **quantified**, and languages **ranked** according to **degree** of endangerment. UNESCO presents a **deterministic** relationship between its 9 factors and the vitality and function of languages: “taken together, these nine factors can determine the viability of a language, its function in society and the type of measures required for its maintenance or revitalization”

2.2 **Languages as bounded objects** – selections of phenomena are crystallised into a singular ‘language’, which is placed within **boundaries**, on **maps** etc., e.g. LL-map (LinguistList) links “geographical information on the area in which a language is or has been spoken to data on resources relevant to the language.”

2.3 **Languages as technical encodings** (“**archivism**”) – quantifiable properties (recording hours, data volume, file parameters) and technical desiderata (‘archival quality’, ‘portability’, standard ontologies) as reference points in assessing aims and goals of documentation, resulting in formulaic grant applications, e.g. “100 hours of 16 bit 44.1MHz audio, 25 hours MPEG-2 video, 10% ELAN .eaf files”. These eclipse discussion of documentation **methods**, e.g. we see video recording without goals, methodology or hypotheses; audio compression deprecated in the absence of understanding how to make good recordings; few corpus structure plans

2.4 **Languages as exchangeable goods** – the research goal is for languages to be ‘preserved’ as ‘**resources**’ that ‘consumers’ (linguists et al) discover and access via ‘service providers’ (OLAC publicity). Linguist’s professional obligations to speaker communities are now often formulated in grant applications and elsewhere in terms of **transacted objects** (language primers, CDs, books) rather than knowledge sharing, joint engagement in language maintenance activities, or other interactionally-defined achievements. Granting agencies require a linguist’s bona fides to be distilled into a ‘letter of support’ from ‘an appropriate representative of the language community’ thus turning a complex of social and political dynamics into an object that is used to legitimise the research

3. Identifying gaps – the moral and emotional power of endangerment discourse is not matched by conceptual guidance on how linguistics and linguists can respond. Publications about effective and appropriate documentary methodologies for linguists have been slow to develop. Many unanswered questions remain, e.g. (1) are the **goals** of documentary linguistics social or formal? (2) are its **data** symbolic, or digital recordings of events? (3) what role(s) should **archives** play? (4) how could we decide between competing interests? We lack a framework for assessing **quality, value, effectiveness** and **progress** of our work – so documentary linguists fall back on quantifiable indices and technical standards.

4. Agendas for the future – we should recognise that commodification derives from bureaucratic and technological contexts and not take it for granted in our response to language endangerment. We need to develop a **new approach** to language documentation that implements the moral and ethical vision that has attracted new participants and funders, by replacing the rhetoric that documentation is a separate discipline from descriptive linguistics with a better understanding of their respective goals, methodologies and evaluative criteria. In the process, it will be crucial to properly locate documentation within a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches to human language.

¹ Poster newspaper cartoon drawn by Jennifer Evans.