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# Language documentation, language description, and language revitalization: partners or problem neighbours?

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Thanks and absolution to: Julia Sallabank, David  
Nathan, Lise Dobrin

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# Overview

- Some terminology and definitions
  - Relationships:
    - Documentation  $\leftrightarrow$  Description
    - Description  $\leftrightarrow$  Revitalization
    - Documentation  $\leftrightarrow$  Revitalization
  - Alternatives for the future
  - Conclusions
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# Terminology (revision)

- Language documentation
  - Language description
  - Language revitalization
  - Language maintenance
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## For discussion

Briefly define: description, documentation, revitalization

How are they different from each other?

How are they similar to each other?

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# Language documentation

- “concerned with the methods, tools, and theoretical underpinnings for compiling a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties” (Himmelman 1998)
  - Features:
    - *Focus on primary data and analysis*
    - *Accountability*
    - *Long-term storage and preservation of data and analysis*
    - *Interdisciplinary teams*
    - *Cooperation with and direct involvement of the speech community*
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# Language documentation – outcomes

- *Narrow view*: outcome is **annotated and translated corpus** of archived representative materials on use of a language, cf. DoBeS/TLA, ELAR – separate from **description** (language as system)
  - *Broad view*: outcome is transparent records of a language (“for philologists in 500 years time”), with description and theorisation dependent on them (Woodbury)
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# Language description

- Looks at language as a structural system, abstracted away from use
  - Is concerned with questions like:
    - What is a language system/grammar?
    - To what extent are languages alike and to what extent are they different?
    - What does this tell us about the human mind?
    - What does this tell us about human communication?
    - How does a language system work and how is it acquired?
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# Language description requires

- Asking the right questions/collecting relevant data. Rice (2005: 236) argues that formal syntactic theory forces a grammar writer to ask questions that are not very likely to be asked otherwise.
  - Making generalisations and drawing distinctions about the grammar of languages. In other words, descriptions must be generalizable, rather than simply observational, i.e., must represent broad statements about the described linguistic system.
  - Labelling and categorizing the phenomena in one way or another (i.e., you need a 'metalanguage', comparative concepts, terminology ...)
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# Language description requires

- A theory ('framework') that underlies the labels and categories, e.g., 'generative' or 'functional' mechanisms, and a model for argumentation and explanation
  - Presenting data and analyses in a way that is acceptable and interesting to a wider audience – a “grammar” or “dictionary” as an academic object, organized in a particular socio-culturally accepted way
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# Language revitalization

- efforts to increase **language vitality** by taking action to:
    - increase the domains of use of a language and/or
    - increase the number of speakers (often in the context of reversing language shift) both adults and children
  - older than language documentation (serious work began in 1970s and 1980s among Maori, Native American groups and others)
  - Speech/language community members are often more interested in revitalization than documentation
  - Often assumed revitalization = formal language learning (school lessons, immersion)
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# Language revitalization – what's involved?

- Usually driven by 'the community' (who are they?)
  - Speakers and learners create opportunities to use the language, and address the ideologies, and social and political attitudes that triggered the language shift
  - Usually involves second language learning (therefore curriculum and materials design and development)
  - And extending the language into new domains of language activity (requires language planning)
  - May be bottom-up or top-down
  - Choice of a model: master-apprentice, immersion, bilingual education, L2 learning, language/cultural awareness
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# Language maintenance

- ‘whereas the goal of revitalization is to increase the relative number of speakers of a language and extend the domains where it is employed, maintenance serves to protect current levels and domains of use’ (Grenoble & Whaley 2006: 13)
  - May involve development of orthographies, new written genres, technological adaptations, vocabulary management
  - Communities may not (want to) realise their language is endangered, so may resist language management efforts needed for maintenance
  - Need to explore whether language shift is occurring, e.g. shrinkage or loss of domains, reduction in use by younger generations
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# Language maintenance involves

- Increasing status / prestige of a language
  - Promoting additive bi/multilingualism rather than shift
    - e.g. cognitive benefits of bilingualism
    - May involve language mixing
  - Literacy – if desired
  - Development of orthographies, new written genres, technological adaptations, vocabulary management
  - Development of curriculum, pedagogy, and materials for ‘mother-tongue’ education
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# For discussion

- What sorts of things do communities want from researchers?
  - What sorts of things do they **not** want?
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# Language and cultural support

Other activities that can assist with language and cultural activities

[Link](#)

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# Relationships

- Documentation <--> Description
  - Description <--> Revitalization
  - Documentation <--> Revitalization
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# Documentation <--> Description

- Himmelmann 1998 claims they are essentially separate activities and have different epistemologies, methods, and goals
  - Description typically uses a narrower range of methods than language description: elicitation (word lists, questionnaires, translation, grammaticality judgements) vs. participant observation and data collection in its socio-cultural context ('naturalistic language', e.g. conversation), and/or experimentation (stimuli, games).
  - Descriptive sources often not tracked (Gawne et al. 2017) and hence research is not reproducible (Berez-Kroeker et al. 2019)
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# Description <--> Documentation

- Documentation needs an epistemology for media capture – audio and video recording
  - Need to pay attention for good practices in recording – eg. microphone choice and spatiality in audio, framing-lighting-editing for video (“recording arts”)
  - Some concern for socio-cultural context (‘ethnography of speaking’)
  - Concern for data structuring and data management – eg. ‘portability’, relational modelling, XML
  - Concern for ‘standards’ and cross-project comparability, especially typology and data mining
  - Concern for ethics of research – documentation collects language use in ‘intimate’ personal contexts, impacts on potential users and uses of documented speech events
  - Changing models of research and relationships with people
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# Description <--> Revitalization

- Revitalization' has been seen by some descriptive linguists as a waste of time, an instance of 'linguistic social work' (Newman 2003)
  - Dimmendaal (2004: 84): "From my perspective the main focus should be on the documentation, rather than revitalization, of these endangered languages. ... revitalization, in my view, should not be given high priority. When individuals decide to give up their mother tongue, they usually have good reasons for doing so."
  - Are (2015: 26) "the fate of the struggling languages is to some extent a function of a natural process of linguistic selection similar to Darwin's theory of natural selection. Human intervention must be measured dispassionately, especially where resources are scarce, to avoid unnecessary waste. In summary, it is proposed that where it seems most certain that a language is doomed (having empirically calculated its situation in accordance with the proposed system) no effort of functional preservation should be attempted."
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# Description <--> Revitalization

- Penfield & Tucker (2011: 293) “Some linguists feel that their responsibility ends when the language materials are correctly archived.”
  - Dobrin et al; (2009: 43) “Linguists professional obligations to field communities are often formulated in terms of transacted objects rather than through knowledge sharing, joint engagement in language maintenance activities or other kinds of interactionally-defined achievements.”
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# Description <--> Revitalization

- ❑ Bach (1995) ““I will try to put at least half of my time and effort in working in a community into things that make sense for the community. What that work might be can range from things as simple as copying tapes for people who want them, through preparing texts, etc. in ways that are accessible, to helping out with language programs, etc.”
  - ❑ Revitalization’ has been seen by some descriptive and documentary linguists as a necessary component of their work for ethical or language community reasons (and to please funders) but to be a simple technical add-on – something to ‘make **for** the community’
    - = orthography, dictionaries, videos, primers, multimedia, apps
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# Description <--> Revitalization

- ❑ Penfield & Tucker (2011: 293) “Materials may be generated that are community-friendly, but rarely as part of a **larger language plan** that factors in rates and levels of acquisition as a most basic requirement.”
- ❑ Penfield & Tucker (2011: 292) “transformation of technical linguistically documented language into workable, teachable language materials invites **professionals trained in applied linguistics** ... Yet, there is a striking **shortage** of applied linguists in the field of endangered languages. There is also a **lack of training and awareness** on the part of those trained in formal linguistics about the nature and implementation of applied studies of language ... we believe that there needs to be more research to determine what applied linguistics can bring to the endangered language field.”

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# Documentation <--> Revitalization

- **Political and ideological challenge:** observed and documented language practices may not match perceived/stated ones
  - Some speakers/language activists may prefer ‘folk linguistics’ or **purism** to documentary evidence
    - Documentation which demonstrates low vitality, attrition, ‘decline’, variation and change may be **unwelcome**
    - Even if recordings of language use events (‘performances’) are chosen for revitalization materials, community members and teachers may wish to ‘edit’ them in various (untheorized) ways (see Mosel 2008, 2011, 2014)
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# Documentation <--> Revitalization

Documentary methods and outputs are not always useful for revitalization:

“Work on language documentation to this point has tended to focus on what sorts of records are required to facilitate the creation of grammars, dictionaries, and texts, rather than, for instance, considering what kinds of records are required to adequately document patterns of variation in a community or to provide sufficient context to inform community efforts at language standardization.” (Childs, Good & Mitchell 2014)

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# Documentation <--> Revitalization

- The content of much, or perhaps most, language documentation outputs are **unsuitable** for revitalization (Austin 2020, Austin & Sallabank 2018, see also Mosel 2011):
    - focus on unusual or ‘interesting’ linguistic features and often **lacking in interaction**, especially conversation (how we begin, end or change and interrupt a conversation varies from language to language), how to use language to get people to do things, what is appropriate to say or not say in what situation, how to agree, disagree or argue with someone, and how to be a functioning speaker of the language;
    - **inappropriate** genres or topics
    - primarily speech of older fluent speakers (reflects linguists’ ideology of “saving the language” or “getting the best language”) – may be **difficult for learners to process**: poor articulation, slurring, high context dependence on background knowledge or history of people and places that might not be clear or obvious
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# Documentation <--> Revitalization

- conversations, narratives, and interviews may **focus on the past**, looking back nostalgically to the ‘good old days’ before social, cultural and linguistic shifts began to take place, often highlighting the childhood or early adulthood of the current oldest generations of speakers. It may be accompanied by **negative evaluations** changes that have taken place, with a sense of ‘loss’ or ‘corruption’ of older ways of speaking and thinking. Such materials and attitudes can be off-putting for children and young learners, and those who wish to see a positive image for the future of the languages;
- no **learner-directed** speech (cf. Slow Italian website)
- So, what would language documentation look like if it was done with a goal of producing outputs for revitalization?

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# Documentation for revitalization

- Documentary methods would focus more on participant observation and less on experimental and elicitation methods (especially translations of strange objects like “Frog Story”), both to observe and analyse language use, as well as probe language and language learning ideologies and beliefs (Dobrin & Schwartz 2011)
  - Meta-data would be expanded to include categories for learning and pedagogy (Nathan & Fang 2009). Documentary records would be tagged in their meta-data for language content and level from a pedagogical perspective (e.g. two-person conversation about shopping, ideal for intermediate learners, varied use of imperatives, shows some borrowed words from Spanish)
  - Interfaces to archival materials would be accessible and intelligible to a wider range of users, in the languages that they know and in a form that is readily usable by them (unlike current documentation archives, Austin 2018)
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# Documentation for revitalization

- Grinevald (2003: 60) “combine fieldwork with teaching, training, and mentoring native speakers for sustainable documentation projects.”
  - Engage a wide range of stakeholders, including those living outside the original location, in planning, execution and mobilization of documentation: community members, activists, students, enthusiasts. Involvement can lead to increase of language skills and practices, create stronger links with other speakers, and elders in particular, and promote local language revitalization activities and changes in language attitudes;
  - Create and develop local community-based and community-driven language and culture archives (Wilbur 2014);
  - **Result:** improved quality of resulting documentation (e.g. better translations, more culturally appropriate situations, a wider range of social activities recorded etc.) and better materials for learning and teaching
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# Documentation **for** revitalization

- Document a **wide range of contexts**, including non-traditional and contemporary interactional events, activities, and locations, e.g. community meetings, medical centres, places of employment, internet and social media, and interactive games;
  - Include **relevant training**, e.g. through grass-roots workshops, to spread knowledge and skills more broadly, improve capacity-building for community members, and increase their awareness of their own knowledge, skills, and agency (training in how to transcribe or use software tools is insufficient), e.g. Olko 2019, Penfield & Tucker 2011.
  - See Taylor-Adams 2019 for a case study in North America
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# Documentation **for** revitalization

## Documenting **different genres**:

- ❑ Informal conversation, not just narratives or rituals (Sugita 2007, Amery 2009),
  - ❑ interactions (greetings, leave takings, ‘phatic communication’, apologies, politeness expressions, insults, excuses)
  - ❑ family language, e.g. between parents or grandparents and children – can re-establish intergenerational generations transmission: lullabies, songs, riddles or other culturally appropriate language use, affective terms e.g. ‘grandma’, ‘honey’, ‘sweetie’ etc., and terms of respect used to elders;
  - ❑ instances of learner’s use of the language (documenting revitalization experiences and processes)
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# Documentation of revitalization

- Accounts of revitalization are often unstructured ‘just-so stories’
  - Need to document the processes, decision-making, events, successes, and failures for learning from them
  - documentation can provide valuable resources for and feed back into ongoing curriculum design, materials development, testing, and evaluation
  - *activities*: learners, individually or in groups, speak about experiences in intergenerational activities, families, schools, or other contexts. What the older generation talks about, or describe what they saw, heard or felt;
  - identify psychological or interactional factors for successful or unsuccessful transmission of the language.
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# Conclusions

- Relationships between language documentation, language description, and language revitalization vary over time, space, contexts, and individuals involved, and there is no 'one size fits all' arrangement or set of relationships
  - Sometimes the different areas **avoid** each other
  - Sometimes the connections are brief and unfulfilling (**one night stand**)
  - Occasionally the relationships are deep, meaningful, and potentially long-term and rewarding for all concerned
  - Like long-term relationships in the real world, deeper connections between these three fields need understanding (theorization, development of communities of practice), and hard work (commitment, practice, participation, and flexibility)
  - and lots of patience!
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**Thank you!**

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