Keeping Languages Alive

Many of the world’s languages have diminishing numbers of speakers and are in danger of falling silent. Around the globe, a large body of linguists are collaborating with members of indigenous communities to keep these languages alive. Mindful that their work will be used by future speech communities to learn, teach, and revitalize their languages, scholars face new challenges in the way they gather materials and in the way they present their findings. This volume discusses current efforts to record, collect, and archive endangered languages in traditional and new media that will support future language learners and speakers. Chapters are written by academics working in the field of language endangerment and also by indigenous people working ‘at the coalface’ of language support and maintenance. Keeping Languages Alive is a must-read for researchers in language documentation, language typology, and linguistic anthropology.

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Keeping Languages Alive

*Documentation, pedagogy, and revitalization*

*Edited by*

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and

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Preface

Increasing numbers of the world’s languages have ever fewer speakers and are in danger of falling silent. To tackle this problem, scholars are collaborating with members of indigenous communities all around the globe to document and describe these endangered languages and cultures so that future speech communities may learn, teach, and revitalize their languages.

Documentation is often considered an essential part of the work of any field linguist. It is self-evident that, if teaching (whether in schools or within the wider community) is a key component in keeping a language alive, then for this to occur some form of record of that language needs to exist to provide a basis for that teaching. Because of its associations with standardization, written documentation can provide much-needed linguistic bolstering, as a language becomes codified in dictionaries and grammars, both of which serve to facilitate the production of pedagogical material by forming the linguistic basis for revitalization efforts. Over and above this, however, documentation carries with it a vital symbolic force. It serves important needs and functions in support of language maintenance by raising the status of endangered languages and fostering a sense of unified identity (especially in areas where a dispersed population or dialectal fragmentation have not been conducive to this). It can even provide a partial means of repackaging a hitherto stigmatized identity, as speakers see their ancestral language being used in modern domains. Documentation clearly represents a critical first step in any process of language revitalization, and efforts to maintain a language may well succeed or fail on the basis of the quality and range of material gathered. And yet the all too familiar clock that is ticking loudly for many endangered languages means that the process of documentation may necessarily be rapid and dependent on sometimes arbitrary decisions by linguists – who may be analysing a language for the first time.

This volume aims to explore the three themes of language documentation, pedagogy, and revitalization and how they interface in different communities to help keep languages alive. As we see in the various chapters of this book, given the world’s rich linguistic diversity a ‘one size fits all’ approach is simply not viable – for example, keeping whistled languages or sign languages alive represents a completely different challenge from that of revitalizing a spoken
tongue. Moreover, the sociopolitical and/or cultural context in which these processes take place can either impose particular constraints or bring increasing freedoms for language planners.

The twenty-first century has also brought a whole new tool-kit to the linguist’s workbench in the form of new technologies with the ability to transform the documentation of endangered languages and also their dissemination within a community. Digital and audiovisual archives are increasingly commonplace, and avatar teachers and mobile phone apps are becoming ever more prominent. Such technology has had a considerable impact upon the ways in which documentation, pedagogy, and revitalization interact with and complement each other. The volume discusses current efforts to record, collect, and archive endangered languages in both traditional and new media, and assesses the different kinds of support that these can offer future language learners and speakers.

Keeping languages alive ultimately depends on languages being spoken by children in the home and especially the kitchen, but getting there often requires a combination of quite different approaches – frequently involving collaboration between academics working in the field of language endangerment and members of indigenous communities who are working ‘at the coalface’ of language support and maintenance. The volume accordingly gives voice to both types of contribution.

The data and case studies presented here are drawn from many different languages that are currently being kept alive across four of the world’s continents. The sixteen chapters are divided into three Parts. Part I addresses both theoretical and practical issues relating to language documentation and illustrates them with material from: Australian Aboriginal languages; Adang (spoken in Indonesia); the Tungusic languages of Siberia; Kildin Saami; Romeyka; and sign languages in Mexico, Bali, Turkey, and North America. Part II, on pedagogy, focuses on methodologies and practices in Aboriginal languages of eastern Australia, Montana Salish in North America, Maori in New Zealand, and North Saami in Scandinavia. Part III examines different aspects of language revitalization and draws on material from current projects in France, Nicaragua, Greece, Turkey, the Channel Islands, and Spain.