

Documenting Multilingualism and Contact

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Abstract

In order to understand why languages become endangered, linguists must shift from documenting the last fluent speakers to documenting the larger ecology of language use in an area. The papers in this special issue all address different aspects of documenting language multilingualism. They address three related topics: (1) consideration of the state of multilingualism in endangered language ecologies; (2) tools and methods for transcribing, annotating, analyzing and presenting multilingual corpora; and (3) methods in documenting and studying language contact in process.

Keywords

language shift – multilingualism – documentation

1 Introduction

In this special issue we examine the connections between multilingualism, language contact, and language shift in the context of language documentation. These topics are generally treated as three separate subfields of linguistics: multilingualism studies the synchronic use of two or more languages in

the same space or spaces, while contact linguistics has largely been concerned with the diachronic effects of multilingualism. And studies of language endangerment have been somewhat off to the side, primarily focusing on either the language in process of shift, or on a study of the factors that foster or deter such shift. Even work in language revitalization primarily focuses on enhancing the vitality and sustainability of an individual target language and not so much on building or supporting multilingual practices. All these subfields are concerned not only with linguistic but also social factors; multilingualism and contact do not occur in a vacuum but are fundamentally social processes as, we would argue, is language itself.

The study of language shift in endangered language communities is reminiscent of research in heritage language communities (see Brown and Bousquette, 2018; Montrul and Polinsky, 2021; Nagy, 2017). Where studies of heritage languages focus on immigrant communities shifting to a dominant language, endangered languages often suffer the reverse effect: an influx of settlers that interrupts the natural ecology of languages in an area. Where immigrant languages have a homeland that establishes a monolingual standard, endangered languages have no other home, and that raises the stakes of language shift for the community and for linguists.

Language endangerment is caused by a number of factors, ranging from natural catastrophe, disease, famine, war, and genocide: situations that result in an entire population of speakers disappearing. But the most common cause of language shift is due to either overt repression or social, political or economic dominance of some kind, all of which lead to people giving up their ancestral or family language in favor of the language spoken by the dominant or majority population (Austin and Sallabank, 2011; Grenoble, 2011; Nettle and Romaine, 2000). Broadly defined, language shift is thus generally the result of language contact, with unbalanced social dynamics of some kind fostering shift and loss. Since at least the early 1990s, linguists have been intensely concerned with documenting endangered languages, focusing on recording remaining fluent speakers while this is still possible. Special attention is generally given to elderly, highly proficient speakers, who are generally understood to speak varieties that are less affected by language contact and shift. This emphasis has come from a perhaps natural research bias that strives to document the linguistic system as fully as possible, while possible. The documentation of endangered languages has to date primarily focused on the creation of monolingual documentary corpora, and yet it is well-known that language endangerment is primarily due to shift in the face of language contact, and not due to catastrophic weather, natural disaster or war. We need to document

language contact in progress, to understand the linguistic processes that take place in the course of language shift, the kinds of language changes that occur, to provide insights into directionality and rates of change, and the roles of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors involved in language shift.

The net result has been a tremendous amount of activity that documents, describes and analyzes a wide range of endangered languages. This research, although invaluable, may often fail to document the larger language ecosystem, the multilingual setting in which language shift occurs. In many situations, it is not the case that there is clear separation of languages in terms of domains; rather, multilingual conversations, heavy language mixing and code switching are the norm. By focusing on documenting monolingualism, we miss the dynamics of actual language use on the ground. Moreover, we are missing an opportunity to document contact-induced change in process. Contact linguistics has focused on historical outcomes, on the end results of contact, reconstructing the historical processes that led to a specific language in a synchronic moment. The fact of global language endangerment, as sad as it is, also provides us with an opportunity to study change and shift in progress, in a wide variety of situations, with different variables at play: contact between genealogically unrelated languages vs. related languages, typological differences, social and political differences and dimensions, varying language attitudes, and so on. Although current models of language endangerment largely predict a single end result (loss of the local language in favor of the dominant one), we do not have models that predict the steps along the way, with a few notable exceptions, such as in studies of Dyirbal or Light Warlpiri (e.g., Schmidt, 1985; O'Shannessy, 2016).

Doing this requires some retraining and refocusing of goals, and one step toward this is a special volume that enables active engagement of the linguistic community in the formulation of these goals. The papers in this special issue originated in a workshop aimed at advancing the field of language documentation by focusing on documenting multilingualism and language contact.¹

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2 Research Questions in the Present Volume

The papers in this issue consider how traditional language documentation (Himmelman 2006) might be extended to cover multilingual discourse and language contact. Following are some of the key research questions addressed here.

2.1 *What Language Ideologies are Prevalent in the Community Regarding the Heritage Language, Other Languages, Revitalization, Documentation, and Multilingualism?*

Paul Kroskrity's paper on "Multilingual language assemblages: Language contact, documentation and revitalization" shows that language ideologies have an impact on the outcomes of language contact, examining the results of contact, and revitalization efforts, in two different speech communities with different ideologies. Kroskrity introduces the concept of *language ideological assemblages* (LIA) to provide a more integrated framework to understand the complex interaction of multiple factors underpinning how a group reacts to language contact, not only ideologies and beliefs about language, but also group identities, linguistic structures, discourse practices, and – of course – the relations between the speakers themselves.

2.2 *How can Studying Different Communities Help us Assess Socioeconomic, Political, and Geographical Factors in Language Shift?*

Hildebrandt, Bond, and Dhakal call attention to the need for contrastive study of language contact in different locations. Their study is based on corpus data (video interviews) of four Tibeto-Burman languages in a district in Nepal. They find a dramatic contrast between Gurung, which shows extensive contact with Nepali, and Nar-Phu, with relatively few contact effects. Factors the authors highlight in explaining differences are what they call locational stability (the presence of jobs and other opportunities in the speech area) and access or proximity (e.g., in the form of roads) to Nepali as the national language. Nar-Phu, although geographically isolated and showing few contact effects, is declining due to outmigration. Gurung, however, shows a more stable speaking population, but the tradeoff is more contact with Nepali.

2.3 *How can Existing Documentary Practices be Broadened to Document the Ecology of Language Shift?*

Jeff Good's paper considers how the standard methods of language documentation (recordings, questionnaires, interviews, metadata, annotation) can be

extended to multilingual contexts. In some cases these extensions are relatively easy, such as recording information on the linguistic repertoires of individuals and not suppressing multilingual usage in recordings. He goes on to recommend more focused work, however, that would explore local language ideologies and the development of linguistic repertoires over an individual's lifespan.

2.4 *How can Questionnaires be Modified to Assess the Importance of Relationships Between Speakers in Multilingual Contexts?*

Pierpaolo Di Carlo describes his experiences using traditional language surveys in areas such as rural Cameroon, where many interconnected villages in a region are felt to have their own ways of speaking. He finds that existing questionnaires adopt assumptions of diglossia theory: that language choice will typically be influenced by workplace, school, market, etc., and that speakers will have a single identity based on such categories as gender, age, and social class. What he finds instead in rural Cameroon is that use of one lect or another is determined by *relational identity* (the relationship of the speaker to the hearer in village-based social networks) instead of the domain of use or categorical identity. He offers ideas for a revised type of questionnaire that would help identify usage patterns based on multiple familial connections.

2.5 *How can Text Annotation be Done in Such a Way as to Identify Linguistic Resources While Acknowledging Fluidity and Ambiguity in Multilingual Communication?*

One of the thornier issues for documenting and studying multilingual practices is the very mechanics of text annotation. Isabelle Léglise addresses this problem in her contribution, while specifically focusing on the thorny issue of the boundaries of languages. Research has increasingly shown that the boundaries of language are not rigid but porous. In cases of language contact between two or more closely related languages, defining which language is which is especially problematic; Léglise provides examples between various Creole languages in French Guiana, where elements in a single utterance may be interpreted as coming from one or the other, or both simultaneously. Speakers in such situations have rich linguistic resources to play with in their interactions, and the analyst needs to understand how they are employed to interpret their social meaning. The transcript (with its annotations) is itself not only a tool in analysis, but an analysis in its own right.

There are, of course, many other research questions that need to be addressed in order to document the ecology of language shift. In describing proficiency in a heritage language, for example, Vorobyeva and Bel (2021) note

the importance of the age of onset to L2, the quantity (and quality) of exposure to L1, and family language use. This sort of information could be collected for each speaker and studied in the community through interviews, surveys, and observation. Our argument here is that deep histories of language use may be necessary to understand the contact ecologies that have resulted in the effects we find today.

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