Disciplinary Perspectives on Language Documentation

For a long time in anthropology, the documentation of languages on the brink of disappearing was negatively tainted as salvage: quaint in its Boasian particularism, inappropriately objectifying speakers as passive vehicles of an authoritatively rendered tradition, naïve in uncritically adopting the folk category of language as an analytic one, and irrelevant to a discipline that is concerned with linguistic practices and ideologies primarily as a form of evidence for claims about other areas of social life.

But over the past couple of decades, a major transition has taken place in linguistics with the emergence of the language documentation research paradigm, which is motivated by the prevalence of language shift around the world. While language documentation and description have long played second fiddle to theory-building in linguistics, many linguists are now recording texts, compiling dictionaries, devising orthographies, and describing grammatical systems. They are doing this not only to serve the goals of linguistic analysis and theorizing, but also to preserve primary linguistic and cultural material for heritage communities and future researchers of all kinds.

In the process of doing this, linguists are being confronted by the fact that the people whose native languages they are documenting may be motivated by surprisingly different priorities and understandings of these activities. Linguists are thus being challenged to consider the significance of their research beyond ‘saving’ and ‘properly describing’ the languages they study. At the same time, anthropologists are poised to benefit from the substantial developments in data management and archiving that have occurred in linguistics in conjunction with the documentation paradigm.

These developments in documentary linguistics provided the impetus for the first products of a new initiative by the AAA and the Linguistic Society of America to explore their members’ common interests. As liaisons appointed to help build bridges between the two associations, we decided that the distinctive methods each discipline brings to the practice of language documentation could serve as a useful starting point for conversation among both fieldworking linguists and anthropologists (and not only linguistic anthropologists!). To that end, we organized two symposia last year, one at each association’s annual meeting.

At the 113th Annual Meeting of the AAA (Washington, DC, Dec 3-7, 2014), the LSA-AAA joint session was entitled ‘Not Your Grandparents’ Salvage: Documentary Linguistics As a Resource for Producing Anthropology in the 21st Century‘. Organized by Lise Dobrin and Alex King, the panelists (Peter Austin, Shobhana Chelliah, Lise Dobrin, John Haviland, and Alex King; discussant Niko Besnier) showed how contemporary language documentation is holistic, inclusive, and opportunistic in ways that are congruent with the practices and concerns of ethnographic research.
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Furthermore, the documentation agenda has energized more general methodological discussions in linguistics that anthropologists would do well to take note of, because they address certain problems that anthropologists share but are less prepared to acknowledge, and because through these discussions linguists are positioning themselves to once again learn from ethnography’s findings and distinctive ways of research.

Documentary linguists are taking full advantage of today’s digital technologies to support research, access, and controls on access to collected materials. Since projects typically produce scores, if not hundreds, of hours of recordings of natural speech, researchers have had to attend systematically to file management to aid in the task of organizing post-fieldwork data. Audio and video recordings can be fabulous resources for scholars and source communities alike, but only if the recordings are supported by adequate metadata so that we know what they contain. The papers in the panel demonstrated how the creation of high-quality documentation is easily within anthropologists’ reach as a byproduct of research they are conducting anyway, and they illustrated how documentary methodologies can constitute an important resource to ethnographers striving to answer their own questions.

The LSA-AAA joint session at the 89th Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (Portland, OR, Jan 8-11, 2015) was entitled “Being There with the Language: Language Documentation in its Ethnographic Context”. This session argued that anthropology’s turn to the intersubjective and the reflexive since the 1980s has profound implications for a number of concerns in language documentation: How do the form and content of utterances that documentary linguists record resemble what people say to one another in other circumstances, and how do they differ from what speakers say when not in front of a recording device operated by someone of a different background (indeed, one often associated with powerful institutions and world systems)? In what ways do different fieldwork methods—structured elicitation, text collection, language learning, etc—contribute to the goals of describing linguistic structure and use? How do we tackle the tension between different understandings of confidentiality, anonymity, or secrecy, and what responsibilities does the existence of such different understandings place on the fieldworker? Organized by Lise Dobrin and James Slotta, the papers (by Lise Dobrin, Robert Moore, and James Slotta; discussant Niko Besnier) explored how language documentation activities are always shaped by the cultural understandings and ongoing political dynamics of the interacting parties, and they argued that analyzing the social context of documentation is crucial background for linguists as they work to interpret the materials they collect and archive.

We hope that these initial efforts to bridge the concerns of contemporary linguistics and anthropology will serve as inspiration for further dialogue between the two disciplines. To register your ideas for future topics, activities, or venues, please contact Lise Dobrin (dobrin@virginia.edu) or Jillian Cavanaugh (jcavanaugh@brooklyn.cuny.edu), who will be working together to take the LSA-AAA partnership through its next phase.

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*Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA Contributing Editors Aaron Ansell (aansell@vt.edu) or Anna Babel (babel.6@osu.edu).*