Towards a framework for language activism

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Goals

- To locate language activism within the development of the field of language documentation and conservation,
- To propose a revised framework for language documentation which acknowledges that language documentation bears a commitment to the maintenance of linguistic diversity.

Language activism & the 'new linguistics'

- This framework is developed within the context of the 'new linguistics': a more participatory and politicized linguistics which is characterized by profound changes to ethics, methods and practice in the field.
- Language activism is at the centre of the new linguistics.

Who are the 'language activists'?

- How are the terms 'language activist' and 'linguist' currently being used?
- 'Language activist' is most commonly used to draw a contrast with 'linguist'.
- A few examples....

- 'However, the scope of the problem requires larger-scale action and this persuaded Himmelmann et al (2005) to seek funding from the Volkswagen Endangered Languages Program to train a new generation of Indonesian linguists and language activists, and to build documentation expertise at both the local and national level'. (Florey and Himmelmann 2009)
Who are the 'language activists'?

I would like to argue that community language activists have had a profound effect on the new documentary linguistics.... Already it is becoming less and less viable for linguists to think of the stakeholders in language documentation to be constituted only of a vaguely-conceived scientific posterity. (Woodbury 2003: 38-39)

"[In Field] was the first time that workshops were combined with field training, that linguists and language activists were brought together for shared training, and that teams of instructors were created from people with no prior acquaintance." (Genetti and Siemens, 2009 ICLDC abstract)

I discuss the work being carried out in Australia by Aboriginal women dedicated to the cause of language revival and maintenance in their endeavours as trained linguists, language workers or community researchers. These women are also language activists on behalf of their communities and they regularly work with non-Indigenous linguists who have an interest and concern for the future of Australian Aboriginal languages." (Bell, 2009 ICLDC abstract)

"The collaboration between the linguist and the community language activist over a decade has produced a traditional dictionary, made using Toolbox and Lexique Pro." (Rau, Yang and Dong, 2009 ICLDC abstract)

Language activist v. linguist

Use of the terms in these examples:
- calls particular attention to the active involvement of Indigenous peoples in the conservation of their own (endangered) languages,
- demonstrates that work with often endangered, minority languages is not restricted to the work of trained linguists who have no heritage link to the language and are external to the language community,
- highlights partnerships and collaborations.

Features: language activist v. linguist

The two terms appear to contrast in relation to

Activities:
- advocacy, revitalization and maintenance vs.
- documentation and description

Indigeneity:
- language activist is often modified by 'Indigenous', 'local' or 'community' vs.
- linguist most often appears to be external to the language community

Training:
- no linguistic training, certificate or in other discipline vs.
- formal linguistic training in a university setting

Assumptions

The core activities of language documentation and description are undertaken by a linguist
- That is, typically someone who is non-Indigenous, external to the language community and formally trained in linguistics

The core activities of language revitalization and maintenance are undertaken by a language activist
- That is, typically someone who is Indigenous, internal to the language community and who lacks (higher level) formal training in linguistics
Impact

- Advocacy, language revitalization and maintenance are not seen as core activities of linguists.
- A more onerous responsibility for language conservation activities is placed on concerned individuals or the language community.
- The contrast continues an outdated assumption that members of language communities are not involved in, or do not aspire to be involved in the activities of language documentation and description.

Towards a framework

- We propose a framework for language activism which takes issue with the hard line which is often drawn between documentation and conservation activities.
- Instead, we argue that they are part of a continuum of activities leading to the conservation of a specific language and the sustaining of linguistic diversity in general.

Towards a framework

- The responsibility to confront the language endangerment crisis actively is shared across the discipline of linguistics and between all stakeholders or partners.
- Framework
  1. Language documentation and conservation bear a commitment to the maintenance of linguistic diversity.
  2. Language activism is a necessary and intrinsic component of language documentation and conservation.
  3. Activism is the first step in building efforts towards documentation and conservation.

Context

1. Converging extinction crisis confronting linguistic, cultural and biological diversity,
2. Language rights movement and dialog on the ethics and responsibilities of linguistic research,
3. Place of those language rights within the wider indigenous rights movement,
4. Evidence that every successful language program developed from a small core of people who took action and stayed the course.
Towards a definition & model

- Preliminary definition—‘A language activist is a person who focuses "energetic action" toward language'.
- Mapping activists’ relationships to communities

Revising the definition

a) A language activist is a person who focuses energetic action towards the language rights of {minority peoples / marginalized people / people}

b) A language activist is a person who focuses energetic action towards (preserving and promoting linguistic diversity / supporting language rights).

- Definition (b) most clearly incorporates both language documentation and conservation efforts.

Revising the model

- Documentary linguistic projects are affected by all three of the domains outlined in this framework—life affiliations, built affiliations, external roles

Activism in practice

- Activism binds documentation and language conservation together.
- When activism is recognized in this way, documentary projects change shape:
  - The hardness of the lines commonly drawn between linguist / researcher and community members blur and soften.
  - The notion that the researcher is in the power position fades.
  - Projects become clear team efforts.
  - Our approach to ethics, methods, and practice changes.
Activists Я Us!

- Share information, announcements, etc. on email lists
- Blog about language issues
- Gain and share skills
- Lobby governments on language issues
- Create &/or support organizations which focus on Indigenous languages and cultures
- Serve on a committee/board which supports endangered languages
- Create technological innovations
- Archive your data / help someone else archive their data
- Use your skills to support indigenous rights
- Publicize the cause and raise awareness
- Develop a small grant program
- Put resolutions into action
- ........

Final thoughts .... (for now)

- Becoming an activist, in addition to being a linguist or member of the speaking community, is a process of looking out— and around; a process of engaging others in advocacy for the language.
- The best chance to preserve linguistic diversity is for each of us to increase the level of activism within our own spheres of influence.

Thank you!

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