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Reflections on language documentation in the Southern Cone

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Although many indigenous languages of Chile and Argentina have been documented only in the second half of the 20th century by academic anthropologists and linguists, some languages have a comparatively long tradition of descriptive and documentary scholarship conducted by Catholic missionaries. From a present-day perspective, early descriptions and documentations show some shortcomings (viz., they are often fragmentary and biased in several respects), but they nonetheless constitute a trove of valuable resources for later work and ongoing revitalization endeavors. Current documentary work is now more balanced in terms of Himmelmann's (1998) three-parameter typology (i.e., it pays close attention to communicative events of different kinds of modality, spontaneity, and naturalness), employs audio and video recordings, and takes copyright, access, and sustainability issues seriously. It is also more collaborative and empowering vis-à-vis the role played by indigenous collaborators than in the past and tends to be reasonably multidisciplinary.

Many indigenous languages of Latin America in general and of the Southern Cone in particular have not been documented until recently. The Chonan languages of Patagonia, for instance, drew the attention of linguists and anthropologists only in the 20th century. (Important forerunners include explorer-cum-chronicler Antonio Pigafetta in the 16th century, as well as physician-cum-anthropologist Robert Lehmann-Nitsche and several explorers in the 19th century; see Viegas Barros 2005.) Something similar happened regarding other languages of Chile (Kawésqar and Yahgan) and Argentina (Santiagueño Quechua and Selk'nam); for other languages of the Chaco region (Wichí, Toba, Mocoví, Pilagá, Chorote, Nivaclé, Tapiete, Kaiwá, Ava Guaraní, Vilela), see Golluscio & Vidal (this volume). Yet other languages were neglected and disappeared, leaving few traces outside

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the translation of religious texts, onomastics, and a handful of everyday words, like the Charruan languages of Uruguay (Rosa 2013) and a dozen languages in Argentina and Chile. A notable exception is Diaguita-Calchaquí, also known as Cacán, documented as it was by Jesuit Alonso de Bárcena (1528–1598), but the manuscript is now lost.[1]

Nevertheless, both language description and language documentation have a comparatively old history in Latin America: Catholic priests started describing and documenting indigenous languages—those few they saw as lingua francas—by the mid-16th century and continued working on them, albeit intermittently and irregularly, until the 20th century. (Like in other colonial contexts, the expansion of interethnic relations and territorial appropriation were accomplished with the support of linguistic records, whose accuracy and depth show significant variation.) In the Southern Cone, (first) Jesuits and (later) Capuchins authored full-fledged grammars and bilingual dictionaries, complemented by liturgical and catechistic texts in the early days and by collections of narratives in the early 20th century. Their aim was not only to enable missionaries to work in the areas where the languages were spoken but also to report on how considerable the development of such languages was as an intellectual achievement.

The most remarkable examples of this are Luis de Valdivia (1560–1642), who wrote complete but relatively brief descriptions of the northern variety of Mapudungun and the extinct Huarpean languages Allentiac and Millcayac, and Andrés Febrés (1734–1790), whose work on Mapudungun was either quoted from or integrated in different ways in almost every text dealing with that language in the 18th and 19th centuries (Malvestitti & Payás 2016).[2] Notably, missionary linguistics continued well after Spanish colonial rule had come to an end. In Chile, Félix José de Augusta (1860–1935) wrote a complete and fairly thorough description of the central variety of Mapudungun, and collected many texts (narratives and songs) from bilingual consultants who lived near the missions. In southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, a number of Anglican priests from the South American Missionary Society authored language descriptions of Günün a Iajüch and especially Tehuelche and Yahgan,[3] as did some Italian Salesians for Selk'nam and Kawésqar. Other missionaries helped them and continued their work (see, e.g., Moesbach 1930, 1962 and Molina 1967). Late missionary linguistics found intellectual support in the anthropological work conducted in the Southern Cone until the 1950s—which contrasted with the work conducted by professional linguists of the region until then, limited as it was to either European languages or historical-linguistic issues like genealogical relations and dialectal variation, as well as areal relationships and migration.[4]

This tradition was interrupted in the 1960s, when structural linguistics was introduced as the mainstream framework in Chile and Argentina. Centers for the study of indigenous languages were founded or further developed at several universities of the region, and their members started conducting linguistic fieldwork anew, with new theoretical

[1] Even though Easter Island is part of one of the Chilean territorial administrative units, we do not address its Polynesian language (Rapa Nui) here, because it belongs to the Pacific rather than to the Southern Cone.

[2] As far as the Andean Plateau is concerned, several early descriptions are worthy of mention: Domingo de Santo Tomás's (1499–1570) of Classical Quechua, Diego de Torres Rubio's (1547–1538) of Bolivian Quechua and Aymara, Ludovico Bertonio's (1557–1625) of Aymara, and Diego González Holguín's (1560–1620) of Cuzco Quechua. In addition, Antonio Ruiz de Montoya (1585–1652) authored the first description of Paraguayan Guaraní and early descriptions of several languages of Mexico are also well known and important; see Breva-Claramonte (2007, 2008).

[3] *Günün a iajüch* is the endonym of the language also known as Puelche and Northern Tehuelche (ISO-code: pue). Tehuelche is also known as Aonikenk and Southern Tehuelche (endonym: *aonek'o 'a'jen*; ISO-code: teh).

[4] See, e.g., the valuable Mapudungun text collections by Lenz (1895-1897) and by Lehmann-Nitsche (Malvestitti 2012).

foundations and methods (including audio recordings). At first, some languages were documented rather sketchily, via texts and word lists (e.g., Tehuelche and Selk'nam, by Jorge Suárez 1966–1968, n.d., and Mapudungun, by Golbert 1975). They were described more comprehensively later, via full-fledged dictionaries, grammars, and in-depth studies (e.g., Selk'nam by Najlis 1973; Yahgan by Golbert 1977, 1978; Kawésqar, by Clairis 1987 and Aguilera 2000; Tehuelche, by Fernández Garay 1997, 1998; Mapudungun, by Sánchez 1989 and Salas 1992,[5] among others). By contrast, very few studies were conducted from the perspective of ethnography of communication (e.g., Golluscio 2006).

Early work by missionaries is both the basis for subsequent work and a valuable depository of linguistic, anthropological, and historical information on several indigenous societies of the region. By present-day standards, however, such work shows some shortcomings. Rather than describing the languages for the benefit of academic disciplines, the main objective was to assist learning by L2 speakers involved in missionary endeavors, which led to some domains of language structure and use being inadequately covered and other domains being ignored. The missionaries did not work haphazardly and were acquainted with contemporary British, Italian, and German philological and anthropological scholarship. Nevertheless, the blueprint employed was centered on Nebrija's (2011 [1492]) Spanish grammar and didactic grammars of Latin and Ancient Greek, and the treatment given to local customs and religious issues regularly betrayed a prejudiced attitude on the part of the authors.[6]

Moreover, documentations were fragmentary and skewed: until the late 20th century, they registered communicative events only exceptionally, and without providing any metalinguistic information. In terms of Himmelmann's (1998) three-parameter typology of communicative events (i.e., modality, spontaneity, and naturalness), even those texts collected since the 1960s recorded almost exclusively oral texts and clearly favored those on the planned and less natural ends (viz., interviews, narratives, monologues, ritual speeches, and elicitation). Language documentation in the Southern Cone transitioned from paper-based formats to those including audio and video recordings by the beginning of the 21st century.[7]

Present-day scholars regard locating, retrieving, and digitizing early written materials that are difficult to obtain as an important task in its own right. Not only does such "declassification" (Pavez Ojeda 2008) of sources preserved in numerous and disparate private and institutional sites help to reassess the proficiency of some language consultants and to contextualize the documentation practices developed in the region. It can also supply new valuable data recorded at a time when the languages were still in everyday use that were simply not considered worthy of publication then.[8] This reconnecting of field data and the situations in which they originated with the present-day language communities is particularly important in the case of languages hitherto regarded as terminally endangered or even extinct, like Günün a Iajüch and Tehuelche:

[5] Adalberto Salas brought a fresh approach to the analysis of Mapudungun grammar and greatly contributed to the development of Mapudungun studies in Chile from the 1970s until his death in 2000.

[6] There is a sizable volume of late-20th-century and early-21st-century literature on how to properly contextualize and assess strengths and weaknesses of early language descriptions in Mesoamerica and South America; see, e.g., Breva-Claramonte (2007, 2008, 2009) and the references therein.

[7] Since the early 20th century, the intention to make audio recordings was mentioned in the linguistic reports, and from the 1950s onwards recording technologies were used in fieldwork. Nevertheless, the publication of audio recordings by linguists was unusual; see, as noteworthy exception, Fernández (1985).

[8] Notable examples of this include information on the composition strategies and transliteration issues in the drafts written by Mapuche collaborators of some well-known scholars, viz. Mankilef for Tomás Guevara (Pavez Ojeda 2003) and Nahuelpi for Lehmann-Nitsche.

it provides valuable support to ongoing initiatives of language revitalization conducted by neo-speakers with the collaboration of teachers and linguists. In this context, it is fitting to mention repositories like the Laboratorio de Documentación e Investigación en Lingüística y Antropología (DILA) in Argentina (which depends on the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas) and the Centro de Documentación Indígena (CDI) and Aike Biblioteca Digital de la Patagonia in Chile, as well as the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) at the University of Texas at Austin.[9]

As far as the limits of documentation are concerned, missionaries and anthropologists were not alone in neglecting the ethical issues that present-day scholars, academic institutions, and funding agencies aptly take so seriously. The bulk of the indigenous-related public policies implemented by the Chilean and Argentinian states during the 19th century and most of the 20th century ranged from racist to assimilationist and paternalistic; cultural and educational institutions have come to safeguard some of the interests of indigenous communities in a systematic fashion only recently. Despite scholarly and legal concerns with intellectual property and the dissemination of potentially sensitive information, field linguists working in the region sporadically face the situations that their fellow researchers routinely report for North America and Australia. Language consultants willing to work with linguists and anthropologists vary greatly with respect to their level of (Western) education, their occupation and place of residence, and their involvement in, and support of, community-oriented political or cultural activities. Such heterogeneity notwithstanding, consultants have only recently started to ask researchers to handle issues related to copyright and access to material in a particularly restrictive way. (Such safety measures have normally been imposed by funding agencies and ethics committees since the early 1990s.) To our knowledge, no indigenous society in the Southern Cone shows a picture like the one described for the Rio Grande Pueblos by Brandt (1980, 1981) and mentioned by Himmelmann (1998), where language-mediated religious and ceremonial knowledge is intimately related to political and cultural leadership in such a way that language documentation is inevitably and significantly disruptive.

Unlike in other parts of the world, scholarly activity in the Southern Cone is typically not regarded as exploitative by the indigenous communities. To be sure, interaction with the dominant society has disrupted the communities' traditional way of life and compromised their viability, which has often eclipsed the fact that their worldview has been called into question and their language endangered. To the extent that an ideology of conflict has been explicitly formulated at all in recent times, however—which is perhaps most evidently the case with the customarily belligerent Mapuche—, linguists and anthropologists are usually seen as helpful, and often friendly, intermediaries between the indigenous and the non-indigenous societies.[10] Among other things, scholars provide advice and support endeavors like literacy training and revitalization efforts, as coaches, trainers, and/or fund raisers. Even though sustainable community-based initiatives in which non-indigenous scholars only play a secondary role are still difficult to implement,

[9]We are grateful to reviewer for pointing out to us that Anthony Woodbury, in representation of the AILLA, deposited in 2009 a copy of all recordings of indigenous-language materials collected by Argentinian researchers existing in AILLA in the DILA-CONICET Archive, including Tehuelche recordings by Jorge Suárez and Emma Gregores and Mapudungun recordings by Lucía Golluscio.

[10]This is not a recent phenomenon. For instance, Lehmann-Nitsche's consultants called him *dear doctor* or *inche ñi kume ueni* 'my good friend' (Malvestitti 2012: 55), and Chapman (2002) highlights the friendship established with her main consultants. References of interlocutors as *teacher* and *collaborator* often appear in diverse early-20th-century sources.

especially in the case of small groups with very limited resources, research is conducted in a less paternalistic and more empowering manner than three or four decades ago.[11]

In fact, scholars belonging to the largest indigenous language community of the region started to become active and visible at about that very time. Working outside of academia, Chilean linguist and historian Armando Raguileo (1922–1992) proposed an alternative orthography for the writing of Mapudungun in the mid-1980s (i.e., the so-called *grafemario Raguileo*), which was largely adopted (and later slightly adapted) by non-linguists on both sides of the Andes. Since the late 1980s, teacher Segundo Llamín Canulaf (1926–) and other Mapuche authors have written and published their own educational and historical bilingual texts in Chile, and several Argentinian Mapuche have authored descriptive studies, as well as literary texts (e.g., Ministerio de Educación 2015, Equipo de Educación Mapuche Wixaleiñ 2015). Within Chilean academia, Mapuche scholars like María Catrileo since the 1980s and Elisa Loncon since the late 2000s have significantly contributed to Mapudungun studies with a focus on education and revitalization.[12]

Finally, Himmelmann's article pertinently emphasizes the importance of a language documentation that does not cater exclusively, or even primarily, to linguistic typologists and theoreticians. Analytically inadequate and culturally skewed though it was, pre-modern language documentation in the Southern Cone did leave a lasting legacy of multidisciplinarity—rather unsurprisingly so, rooted as it was in a pre-disciplinary approach employed by non-professional practitioners. Present-day academia strives to counteract some of the negative consequences of ever-deepening specialization in increasingly fragmented disciplines by fostering interdisciplinarity (where individual disciplinary approaches are not only contrasted but also integrated) and transdisciplinarity (where individual disciplines ideally dissolve into novel holistic approaches). Nevertheless, descriptive linguistics in the Southern Cone has barely finished consolidating its status as a discipline in its own right—much along the lines described by Himmelmann (1998). To judge not only from which documentation projects compete, both locally and internationally, for institutional funds and academic validation but also from how successful projects are conducted nowadays, the most healthful and promising pressure to develop some actual interdisciplinarity stems from collaboration with anthropology and educational endeavors.

[11]Even early linguistic research conducted in Patagonia, for example, routinely acknowledged the work of particular (elderly) consultants that had a good memory and were especially talented performers of verbal art (e.g., Borgatello 1928 and Harrington 1946).

[12]See Aguilera & Tonko (2009) for Kawésqar. For almost every language of the region, a growing number of written and multimedia productions developed by indigenous collectives intend to link previous documentations with ongoing revitalization endeavors.

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