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Reflections on linguistic fieldwork in Australia

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Shifts in White-Indigenous relations started to re-shape relations between field linguists and Australian Indigenous communities from the 1970s. So well before Himmelmann (1998) appeared, linguists working on Australian Indigenous languages had been discussing topics such as ethical engagement with Indigenous communities, accessibility of recordings and the best use of technology in archiving and recording. After Himmelmann (1998) appeared, these topics emerged as key topics in language documentation which led to more of these kinds of discussions not only among Australian linguists but also with linguists around the world. The development of language documentation as a field of research fostered greater collaboration between Indigenous communities, linguists, researchers from other disciplines and technology specialists in Australia. New funding initiatives followed the publication of Himmelmann (1998), providing additional support for documentation projects on Australian Indigenous languages. Since the 2000's government support for Indigenous-led initiatives around language has declined in Australia. But growing support for Indigenous researchers within universities is enabling Indigenous communities to become more equal partners in research on their languages.

The emergence of 'language documentation' as a distinct subfield of linguistics undoubtedly had an influence on fieldwork in Australia[1]. However, it is not easy to trace this influence among the other changes already in train when Himmelmann (1998) appeared. Fieldwork practices are influenced not only by developments within academia but also social change in Indigenous communities and the national context of White-

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Indigenous relations. In Australia, the politics of 'Indigenous affairs' changed significantly in the 1970's, creating new possibilities for how (White) linguists and Indigenous communities might work together[2]. The origins of contemporary fieldwork practice can be traced back to the intense, enthusiastic and creative collaborations between linguists and Indigenous people that took place at this time, the birth of the self-determination era. As Indigenous communities gained a stronger political voice, many directed community energies and funding towards supporting their languages. In parallel, descriptive linguists working with Indigenous communities began to reconsider their approach.

Wilkins' (1992) paper, 'Linguistic research under Aboriginal control', reflects on his experiences while working at an Indigenous-run bilingual school in the 1980's. The government funded a number of Indigenous bilingual school programs from 1973 onwards and these were the site of many productive engagements between Indigenous communities and linguists, many of whom started their work in the community as school teachers (Devlin et al. 2017; Laughren 2000). Wilkins identified significant tensions between the goals he had as a linguist, working on a grammatical description of the Mparntwe Arrernte language and the goals of the Indigenous community affiliated with that language. These are now focal topics in the field of language documentation: ethical approaches to working with communities and how best to create accessible documentation materials. Wilkins recounts how the Indigenous representative body, the *Aboriginal Languages Association* presented their statement on the 'Linguistic Rights of Aboriginal and Islander Communities' to the 1984 *Australian Linguistics Society (ALS)* meeting which then was accepted as ALS policy[3]. The activities that Wilkins describes illustrate the climate of postcolonial reflection of that time. Many linguists, like other White Australians at the time, had a strong desire for reconciliation with Indigenous Australians.

Since the 1970's, some Indigenous communities have been able to employ linguists like Wilkins, drawing on government funds and mining royalties. Linguists employed by Indigenous-run organizations are answerable to the Indigenous community first, rather than to academia and thus have more motivation than others to reconsider their fieldwork practices. Many field linguists have been employed outside of academia as expert witnesses in land claims, as interpreters, in Indigenous schools, arts centres and in language centres. Language Centres are a key meeting point for academic linguists and Indigenous communities. Although they were more numerous in the past, language centres continue to provide employment for linguistics graduates, many of whom return to universities at some point, bringing with them a more collaborative approach to working with Indigenous communities (Sharp & Thieberger 2001). At a recent University of Melbourne symposium that brought together researchers and their Indigenous research partners, Indigenous scholar Sana Nakata made a comment that people in Indigenous communities spend a lot of valuable time training White people in how to work with their communities. While linguists have always tried pass on understandings gained in the field to their students, the emergence of 'language documentation' has seen these topics recognized as a part of academic research proper and discussed widely in academic literature. This literature may help new field linguists to understand the basis of good collaboration with Indigenous communities and lessen the burden on Indigenous

[2]In this paper I use the term 'linguist' to refer to the mainly White linguists who do fieldwork on Indigenous languages and are employed by universities rather than Indigenous communities. Other linguists are also crucial to fieldwork on Australian languages.

[3]See the statement at: https://als.asn.au/AboutALS/Policies (accessed 10/10/18).

communities that Nakata mentioned. However as Thieberger has pointed out "The tension between the academic research agenda and the desires of speakers nevertheless remains and requires constant reflection and negotiation" (Thieberger 2016 p.91).

Long before the political developments of the self-determination era there was a strong tradition of linguistic fieldwork in Australia. Involving the creation of grammars, dictionaries and text collections, it was very much in step with the Boasian tradition in the United States. A decline in fieldwork on less documented languages is said to have occurred there with the rise of Chomsky's research program in the 1960's (Woodbury 2010). In fact this was the time when linguist Ken Hale visited and fired up a generation of young Australian linguists to go out and do basic descriptive work (Simpson et al. 2001). This influx of new linguists seems to coincide with an increase in the quality of analyses found in descriptive grammars, as well as their depth and breadth (see for example Tsunoda 1974; McKay 1975; Dixon 1977). During this time, linguists also paid attention to comparing phenomena between Australian languages which helped to identify widespread Australian phenomena such as ergativity that had often been underanalysed.

From the 1970's onwards there is a clear increase not only in the quality of descriptive materials that were being produced but also the quantity. The Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) employed linguist Jeffrey Heath to do descriptive work on Indigenous languages from 1973-1977. His publications, produced with speakers of a number of south-east Arnhem Land languages, are highly valued by their descendants, most of whom have not been able to learn these languages as children. His most detailed work is on Wubuy (Nunggubuyu); comprising a grammar, dictionary and text collection interconnected by such comprehensive cross-referencing that they have been described as a pre-digital hypertext (Musgrave & Thieberger 2012). There is a clear sense of the rapid loss of languages among linguists who did fieldwork on Australian languages in the 1970's because so many worked with the last fluent speakers of a language or language variety. The idea of 'language endangerment' struck a chord with these linguists, drawing parallels with the sharp decline in Australia's biodiversity since 1788, among the fastest rate of extinction worldwide.

The developments of the 1970's, created a receptive audience for Himmelmann's (1998) 'language documentation' manifesto among linguists doing fieldwork on Indigenous Australian languages. At the time it appeared, there were many field linguists working in Indigenous Australian communities with the aim of creating lasting records of Indigenous languages. The appearance of Himmelmann (1998) was accompanied by plenty of debate among these linguists as to whether 'language documentation' was a highly innovative idea or simply a new way of looking at existing practices (Woodbury 2010). With hindsight however, these debates seem less relevant as 'language documentation' has taken on a life of its own. It has become a banner under which field linguists have organized themselves and worked on ways to better meet the needs of Indigenous communities. The field of language documentation has played an important role in fostering new collaborations between linguists, other disciplinary specialists, Indigenous communities and technology experts.

Himmelmann played a key role in developing the Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen (DoBeS)[4] program funded by the Volkswagen Foundation which funded two language

[4]see: http://dobes.mpi.nl/

documentation projects in Australia[5]. The Iwaidjan languages project was focussed on less-documented languages spoken on the Cobourg Peninsula in western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. The DoBeS funding supported an interdisciplinary team that included a number of linguists as well as an anthropologist and a musicologist. This meant that close academic collaborations begun in the field, formed the basis for later analysis, publication and archiving. Funding rules were flexible enough to support a field linguist stationed in one Indigenous community for a number of years. This kind of placement greatly aids collaboration with communities and gives much greater scope for supporting communities to develop their own capacity to do linguistic research.

The emergence of philanthropic initiatives such as DoBeS and the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Programme (HRELP) helped pave the way for Australian universities to recognize language documentation projects as research projects. Short-term project funding became available through the Australian Research Council (ARC) in the early 2000's. Early on, a number of language documentation projects were funded, both team projects and individual research fellowships. The ARC only funds projects that are 'innovative' so language documentation as a new idea helped attract more funding for fieldwork. HRELP funded dozens of projects on Indigenous Australian languages. Together, these diverse sources of funding have made it possible for linguists to respond directly to community-identified goals and document language together with sign, gesture, narrative practice, drawing, music, plant and animal knowledge and complex kinship systems. While linguists tend to focus on language alone, Indigenous communities often want to preserve and maintain holistic Indigenous knowledge systems requiring an interdisciplinary approach involving musicologists, historians, archaeologists, biologists and anthropologists.

One goal of the new language documentation paradigm was to make documentary materials available in an accessible manner and it quickly became apparent that digital language archives were the best way to do this. Making materials accessible is key to making linguistic fieldworkers more accountable to the communities they research, academia and the general public (Berez-Kroeker et al. 2018). Documentary materials in Australian Indigenous languages have long found a safe home in the archive of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. The Institute has enshrined in its constitution, an obligation to serve the interests of Australia's Indigenous people. However, it was slow to respond to the promise of digital archiving. Looking for a way to create a digital archive of their materials, linguists turned to the PARADISEC[6] digital archive, and it has become an important place for digital records of Australian languages. The archive is located across three Australian universities (University of Melbourne, Australian National University and Sydney University) and the outreach activities of founders Nick Thieberger and Linda Barwick have ensured that few researchers of Australian Indigenous languages, music or dance remain unaware of the benefits of digital archiving. PARADISEC has also provided training in recording techniques, compiling metadata, annotation in Elan, etc. to fieldworkers all around the country. An important part of the work of field linguists in the past few decades has been returning early archival materials back to communities. After enrichment of these

[5]A number of research projects on Australian languages were based at the Max Planck Research Institutes in Nijmegen and Leipzig at this time, which further strengthened German-Australian collaborations around language documentation.

[6]http://www.paradisec.org.au/

materials through further fieldwork and annotation they are then re-archived, improving the digital record of the language (Thomas & Neale 2011; Harris 2014).

Australian linguists embraced digital technologies during the nineties and naughties just when key aspects of language documentation were emerging. Many took up Toolbox (SIL International 2018), then Elan (2018) and more recently they have been involved in creating apps to aid documentation in the field such as Aikuma (Bird et al. 2014) and Kinsight (Foley 2017). The latter app (still in development) comes out of a concerted investment into new technology for language documentation by the Transcription Acceleration Project, Centre of Excellence in the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL). However, new developments in technology invariably raise new ethical concerns. For example in Arnhem Land, the widespread ideology of language ownership, whereby languages are owned through one's father, coupled with the distribution of authority (i.e. who can speak for each language) across complex kinship networks, can make checking permissions for materials no simple task.

I will look at two issues in particular, raised by new technology. The first is the way that participants and their lives are much more visible in recent recordings. Traditionally, linguists recorded word lists, isolated sentences and often also a few texts. Within the language documentation paradigm there is an emphasis on 'natural' language use; language in its natural context and also a concern with covering a diverse range of kinds of speech events (Seifart 2008). This has led to linguists recording conversations, multi-participant narratives, songs, sand stories and different kinds of verbal art. As it became easier to record for many hours at a time, simultaneously on multiple recording devices, linguists began to record entire speech events, such as informal conversations or performances of music and dance. If the context is a natural context for language use, then participants are doing something else as well as making a recording, and are less likely to be thinking about the fact that somebody could later watch the recording. In longer recordings, the sheer quantity of data can make it harder for participants to audit all recordings in which they appear. The details of people's lives become much more visible in these kinds of richer and more rewarding recordings. In many ways this is a good thing, as disembodied language data is less valuable to everyone. However it does raise issues about how exposed participants become and how much control they have over this.

The second issue that technology has raised, that will be discussed is the closely related issue of accessibility. The digital archive makes it possible to access recordings much more easily, which can be very useful for speakers and linguists. The greater accessibility of recordings means, however, that more detailed discussions are needed with participants about how to handle the recordings. Where recordings are made available online, linguists often find themselves in the difficult position of discussing access restrictions with elders who have little sense of how truly accessible something can be once it is online. Indigenous Australian communities have always been quite concerned about the circulation of recordings of their people's image and voice. Traditionally, consideration for the bereaved meant avoiding exposing them to images and recordings of the deceased for some time after the death. Images and recordings of the living were also treated with care, in case they got into the wrong hands. However, since phones brought their digital cameras and audiovisual recording capabilities into every home, protocols in Indigenous communities seem to be changing. Images are now widely distributed through social media, including images of the deceased. For example, G. Yunupingu, an internationally known musician from Eastern Arnhem Land died last year before a film about his life was

released. His family decided to approve the release of the film without any delay, which was said to be because they felt it was important to get his message out. This is just one family's decision; strict protocols still hold for the most part. However there is a need to continually re-evaluate community views about the accessibility of archived materials, as participants that appear in recording sessions pass away and also as views about how to handle images and recordings change in Indigenous communities.

The HRELP became a key source of funds for language documentation projects on Australian languages after the DoBeS program ended and the ARC stopped funding projects focussed purely on language documentation. However, a few years ago, HRELP introduced an strong open access policy which meant some linguists doing fieldwork with Indigenous Australian communities no longer consider HRELP a suitable source of funds. The requirements are that most recordings made in current HRELP-funded projects are set to the 'O' (open) setting in the ELAR online archive, although a small proportion may be kept closed if this is well justified by the depositor. For many Indigenous communities it would be difficult to make this kind of commitment in the grant application stage. That said, a number of Indigenous Australian projects have still been funded since the adoption of HRELP's open access policy. One of these is a language documentation project on the Kunbarlang language, which is spoken mainly by older people in western Arnhem Land.

Dr Isabel O'Keeffe is lead investigator of the Kunbarlang language project[7] and Professor Linda Barwick and I are co-investigators. O'Keeffe and I held meetings with the remaining Kunbarlang speakers and their descendants before applying for HRELP funds. They were not concerned about the open access conditions of HRELP funding and expressed a real urgency to make recordings available as widely as possible so that their young people could hear them. At this stage the project is going well and people are happy with the level of access to recordings. However it is hard to know whether things will change in the future if Kunbarlang is no longer spoken. The fact that we have proceeded at each step with openness and many Kunbarlang-affiliated people have relatively high levels of digital literacy, gives us reason to hope that the grant conditions will not cause problems down the track. In effect, the project is an experiment in digital archiving and accessibility as well as a language documentation project. However, it would put less pressure on linguists doing fieldwork on Australian languages if funding bodies gently encouraged open access rather than making it a condition of funding.

Himmelmann (1998) ushered in an era of many new funding initiatives for endangered languages, only a few have been mentioned here. However, the heyday of innovative international funding programs for language documentation has clearly passed. Regardless, language documentation is surviving peak popularity to become an established part of linguistics. Language documentation can now be a central component (if not the sole element) of a linguist's career. Successful language documentation projects and their outputs can be listed on a CV. Recognising language documentation as valid research makes it easier for linguists to devote time to it. Efforts have been made to get the Australian university 'publications accounting' system to count corpora and dictionaries as research outputs just like journal articles (Thieberger et al. 2016). Some Australian universities now recognize dictionaries of Indigenous languages as research monographs, formerly they were not counted as such. Language documentation is also a part of many ARC-funded projects although there is usually a specific research focus to the project such as child language development, small-scale multilingualism or the processing of

[7]Full title: Empowering Indigenous youth to create a comprehensive pan-varietal, ethnobiological, anthropological record of Kun-barlang through training in low-cost language documentation technology.

polysynthetic languages. The language documentation that is part of these projects is broadly valuable, as these projects investigate phenomena in languages that are not well documented.

This paper began by looking at how Indigenous Australians got their languages on the national and international agenda in the 1970's, in a climate of global concern about language endangerment. This inspiring period, known as the self-determination era, ended around 2007[8] by which point government policy had clearly shifted from supporting self-determination towards more assimilationist policies that constructed Indigenous culture including language as a barrier to Indigenous development. Since 2007 we have seen the closure of most Indigenous bilingual schools, reduced support for Indigenous language and culture programs in all schools and a reduction in funding for Indigenous language projects[9]. However, there is a growing understanding of the value of Indigenous knowledge systems within universities and there are more Indigenous students and staff at universities than ever before. The ARC's Discovery Indigenous grant program has funded a five year fellowship for Indigenous scholar Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis to document contemporary verbal arts in the western desert region, together with a team of linguists and anthropologists. Universities are developing pathways for greater inclusion of Indigenous research partners in the research process, through funding for Indigenous research partners to visit universities and travel to conferences and co-present papers. New generations of linguists have a better developed sense of responsibility to the Indigenous communities they work with. So we can anticipate more of an emphasis on linguists being accountable to the communities they work with in the future. Language documentation has provided a framework for field linguists in Australia to discuss important issues and push for change.

[8] A suite of changes are generally seen by scholars of Indigenous politics as marking the end of the self-determination era. The start of these changes are dated by the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) 'The Intervention' and include the abolition of the national Indigenous representative body ATSIC, the closure of most government-run bilingual schools and the replacement of Indigenous community councils with super-shires (Altman 2016).

[9] Although in 2018 this has been increased.

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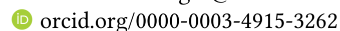 orcid.org/0000-0003-4915-3262