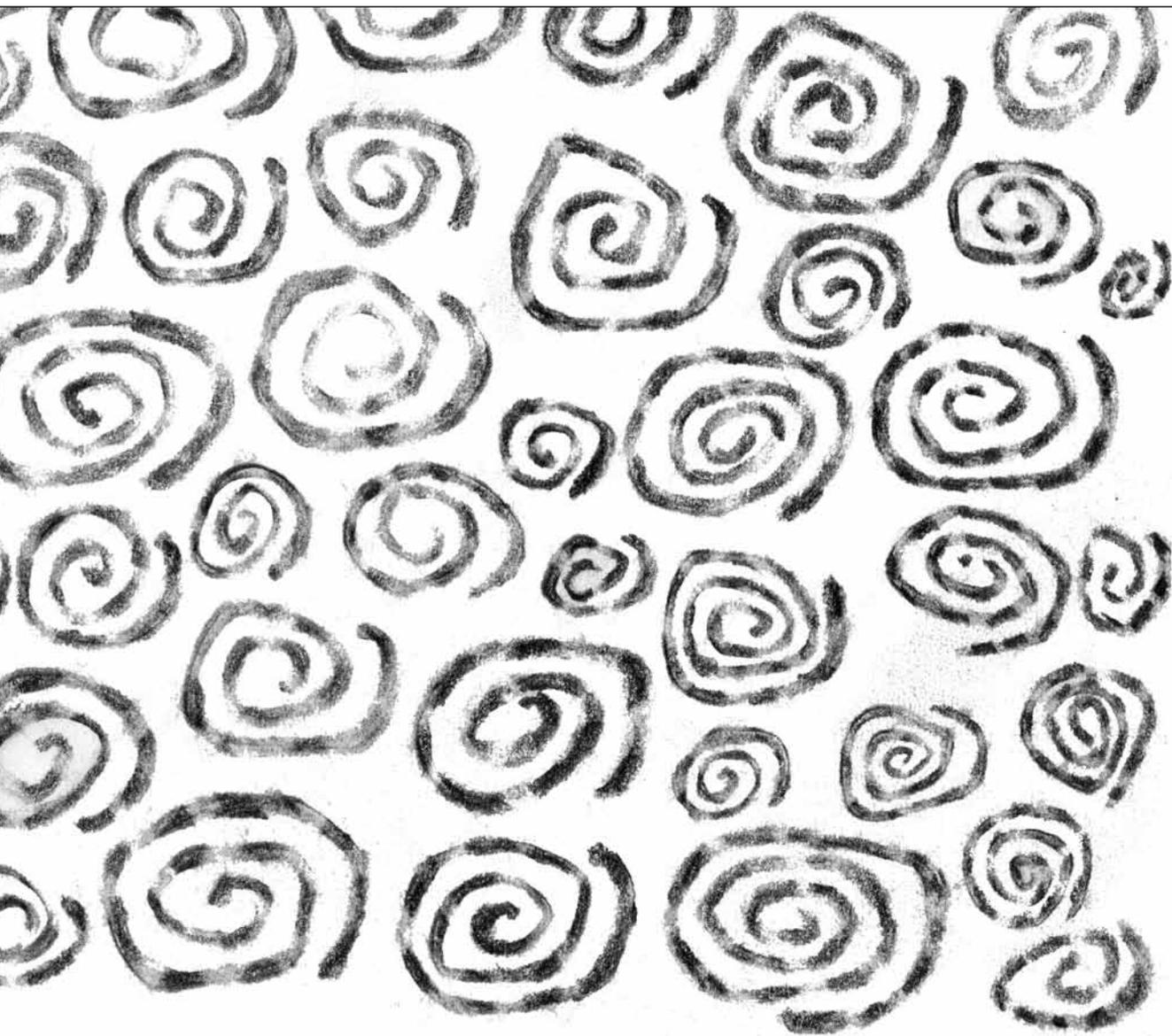


Part Seven

Language documentation



Introduction

Language documentation

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The issue of the value of documentation and its role in language revitalisation has occupied greater attention in recent years (for example Amery 2009; Himmelmann 2006, 2009; Woodbury 2003). Amery raises this important question in the context of language revitalisation of the motivation for language documentation: ‘Phoenix or Relic?’ In other words, are the results to be deployed for bringing a language back, or relegating the language to some archive? More broadly, Grinevald (2003, pp. 60–62) warns that sometimes it might be better not to proceed with fieldwork on an endangered language. And Wilkins, with considerable experience in Australian situations, observes (2000, p. 61):

in fragile, embattled, minority indigenous communities, good intentions are not sufficient for good and useful results, and we must be self-reflective and self-critical about the sorts of practices we engage in that unwittingly will exacerbate rather than alleviate the problem.

The contributions in this section emphasise the urgency for language documentation but remain conscious of the need for caution, care and consultation.

Himmelmann is generally credited with distinguishing descriptive linguistics from documentary linguistics. Briefly put, the latter is ‘a lasting, multipurpose record of the language’ (Himmelmann 2006, p. 1) and is in contrast to the grammar–dictionary format of language description for which the primary goal is to explore the language as an abstract system. Much of the documentation on Australian Indigenous languages in the past has had this focus and, while it has the limitations inherent in the descriptive approach, it has underpinned many of the revitalisation efforts. Woodbury (2003, pp. 46–47) sets out the ideal requirements for a corpus in the documentary approach: diverse, large, ongoing, distributed and opportunistic, transparent, preservable and portable, ethical. The diversity includes examples of everyday interaction: talk between infant and adult; swapping jokes and anecdotes; service encounters; political disputes – most of which are absent in the descriptive approach. Obviously the corpora for Australia’s Indigenous languages vary considerably and the documentation efforts set out in this section also show diversity.

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Baisden's project is paradoxically at once small scale and broad in scope. It is small scale in the sense that it does not attempt to carry out a multitude of tasks but is broad in that it potentially covers the entire state of Queensland: from Weipa in the north to the settled south-east corner. The project relies on the commitment of the State Library of Queensland, tapping the potential within an existing but under-utilised repository of documentation but also providing infrastructure through its network of some 330 library branches and 16 Indigenous knowledge centres. This gave rise to training workshops enabling consciousness raising, confidence building and opportunities for Indigenous people to become much more closely involved in the documentation process. It seems apparent that the Indigenous researcher, Faith Baisden, was instrumental in ensuring appropriate community consultation, the crucial ingredient for the success of this process.

The account by Bower & James contrasts with other situations in this section and indeed in the entire volume. It is an instance of one language variety falling victim to language shift in the midst of otherwise strong language vitality. In fact one could see this group as subject to language prejudice where more prestigious varieties in the region have stigmatised the group's language. Interestingly, the project seems unlikely to have created any additional speakers but, according to Bower & James, it has still produced positive outcomes: a hitherto poorly documented language is now much better documented; people have greater confidence in their language and its profile in the region has been lifted; and there have been positive effects in areas that are not strictly linguistic, like the intergenerational transmission of cultural and ecological knowledge. They argue that judgements of the success or otherwise of revitalisation projects should not be confined to purely linguistic considerations.

The title of the contribution by Eira & Solomon-Dent evocatively captures the recurring problem in language revitalisation of shoring up the linguistic foundations of a language while it is already in use. The renovation of a house already lived in can be not only inconvenient for its inhabitants but raise strong passions about what is to be done. One point of cleavage is the extent to which the new additions are compatible. This account emphasises the need to fill in gaps and exemplifies the process in some detail. It also presents a use of technology to alleviate the tyranny of distance that bedevils language revitalisation where typically the re-emerging speech community is widely dispersed.

The account by Gale & Sparrow is one of two projects describing the process of compiling a dictionary for an endangered language. In this case a primary need arose from school-based teaching of Ngarrindjeri where teachers and Aboriginal education workers required a contemporary, consolidated and authoritative resource for the word-stock of the language. They describe the process through collaborations with two universities, the take up of relevant technologies and the evolution of involvement by Aboriginal people. Intriguingly Ngarrindjeri students at Batchelor College from the 1980s have contributed to this recent upsurge in the documentation of the language. This is particularly through their teacher there, the late Steve Johnson, who built

on the contribution of these students and collected material from people who have since become Elders. Another source of documentation goes back to the 1930s when the ethnographers, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, gathered material from an earlier generation. So it is a good example of material from the archive being re-deployed in a modern context.

Giacon's focus is on the development of the *Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay & Yuwaalayaay Dictionary* and sets out principles for dictionary development (see also Corris, Manning, Poetsch & Simpson 2002, 2004). He amply exemplifies the tension between standardisation and variation – the former being a less faithful reflection of the original language situation and the latter having the potential to interfere with language revitalisation. The solution in this situation has been to acknowledge variation but frame the dictionary in such a way that a common language can emerge across a wide area. In the future there is the possibility that regional varieties might separate but at this early stage of language revitalisation a pragmatic approach has been adopted after suitable community consultation.

In outlining their Cape York project Hill & McConvell stress the complementarity of endangered language documentation and language revitalisation. They also emphasise the *two-way* approach whereby there is a genuine exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants; ten languages in all were supported involving five researcher–community partnerships. An important feature of such collaborations was training in basic documentation tasks so that Indigenous language workers could evolve into co-researchers in their project. However some projects fared better than others and, interestingly, there was more success – particularly with regard to training – where local government and community organisations were strong. Although the results were mixed the overall outcomes were mostly quite positive and the documentation portion of the project yielded rich and varied results including not just audio- but also video-recording across a wide range of contexts and genres, including site recording, songs and cultural events and practices. This goes well beyond more traditional approaches to language documentation, the purpose of which has mainly been seen as an understanding of word formation and grammar. Whatever the merits of such approaches the richer range of documentation sought for in the Cape York project is not only more readily applicable to pedagogical requirements but also seems to be preferred by members of the Indigenous communities.

Obviously only some of the issues that might arise in language documentation for revitalisation have been canvassed in this section. Nevertheless we are presented with a varied array of case studies each with particular benefits and problems. Hopefully they will contribute to an emerging literature that speaks not just to academic theorists and practitioners but also to the wider community.

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