Linguists’ work with endangered languages

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Overview

I. The LSA, through its members, has been involved with endangered language research from its inception.

II. In some ways, the LSA agenda that surrounds research on endangered languages has not changed over the past 90 years

III. In other ways, there have been some noticeable enhancements to that agenda reflecting broader changes in the field.

   A. broader global focus
   B. greater degree of theorizing about language shift
   C. more explicit organizational stance
   D. revitalization emerges as a goal
   E. documentation becomes a sub-discipline
There was concern for “endangered languages” from the outset of the LSA

“The more direct harm to science is too obvious to need exposition; one may mention the American Indian languages, which are disappearing forever, more rapidly than they can be recorded, what with the almost total lack of funds and organization.” Leonard Bloomfield, “Why a Linguistic Society,” *Language* 1:1 (1925)
Much can be inferred about Linguists’ research on and attitudes about endangered languages by looking at one of LSA’s most visible members:

Franz Boas: 4th president of the LSA
1. Documentation

Committee on Native American Languages

Founded in 1927 to “secure an adequate record of Indian Languages and dialects, and to take such other steps as seemed desirable and practicable for furthering the study of native American languages.” [“Proceedings, Annual Meeting, 1928,” ACLS Bulletin 7(April, 1928): 53.]
2. Languages of equal value

‘...power to make us understand the roots from which our civilization has sprung, to impress us with the relative value of all forms of culture, and thus serve as a check to an exaggerated valuation of the standpoint of our own period, which we are only to liable to consider the ultimate goad of human evolution, thus depriving ourselves of the benefits to be gained from the teachings of other cultures, and hindering an objective criticism of our own work’ (1904:524 “The History of Anthropology” Science 20:513-524).
3. Language is ephemeral

‘What I now collect...exists only in the mind of a single man’

‘...a curious thought to exhaust the last of a people and, just as Bastian says, to preserve at the eleventh hour all their tales, customs, etc.’

Excerpts from a letter to Toni Cultee, the sister of Charles Cultee, one of the last speakers of Kathlamat (dialect of Upper Chinook)
Some things have not changed much....
Number of *Language* articles focused on an endangered language

![Line chart showing the number of articles focused on endangered languages from 1925-1930 to 2001-2010. The chart indicates a peak in the 1951-1960 period and another peak in the 1981-1990 period.]
Similar comments about language vitality

Morris Swadesh (1933):
“The language of the Chitimacha Indians of southern Louisiana is now practically extinct. Although there may be as many as a hundred Chitimacha Indians living in Saint Mary’s Parish, Louisiana, practically all of them now speak French or English or both and only two individuals remember the old language” *Language* 9/2:192
But some things have changed...
% of articles on an endangered languages outside of North America
Some Firsts--

First article on special features of attrition in an endangered-lg:

First use of the term “endangered language”:

First appeal to linguists to make the study of endangered languages a priority:
Endangered Languages and Their Preservation (CELP)

Charge

The Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation (CELP) calls attention to the rapid loss of language diversity worldwide and encourages the documentation and study of endangered languages.

(http://www.linguisticsociety.org/about/who-we-are/committees/endangered-languages-and-their-preservation-celp)
Endangered Languages and Their Preservation (CELP)

- Promotes strategies for use by individuals, institutions, and communities to assist and support the maintenance and revitalization of language varieties in language communities at risk of, or currently experiencing, significant language or dialect loss.
- Assists institutions to offer training and degree programs oriented to the preparation of grammars and dictionaries of threatened and poorly documented languages, as well as to the documentation and study of naturally occurring speech of all kinds in communities whose traditional linguistic variety is threatened.
- Advocates for language diversity and the respect of all languages and their users.
- Promotes ethical practices of collaboration and partnership with members of endangered language communities by exploring shared interests and mutually beneficial projects.
- Coordinates activities with other organizations.....
Post 1992 realities

- Forecasting

- Revitalization
  e.g. Dobrin, L. 2008. From Linguistic Elicitation to Eliciting the Linguist: Lessons in Community Empowerment from Melanesia. *Language* 84/2:300-324

- Ethics
  e.g. 2009. *Language* 85/3

- Documentation and Endangered Languages as sub-disciplines