

The Need for the Documentation of Linguistic Diversity

In June 1994, the Linguistic Society of America approved and endorsed the following policy statement, that had been drafted by the Committee on Endangered Languages and Their Preservation:

If the central concern of linguistics is essentially anthropological or psychological, i.e. to provide insight into the nature of "humanness" through the investigation of the structure of human language, then linguistics will without question benefit by supporting research on the documentation of dying or endangered languages. Taking the study of universal grammar and linguistic typology (the study of the restricted ways in which languages may differ from each other) as more concrete manifestations of this central concern, linguistic typology is obviously enriched by knowledge of linguistic diversity, as languages on the geographical or linguistic "fringe" sometimes turn out to be the most diverse typologically (Nichols, 1990). Somewhat less obviously, the positing of language universals must necessarily be revised and thus become more accurate when the structure of divergent languages is made known. The loss to humankind of genetic diversity in the linguistic world is thus arguably greater than even the loss of genetic diversity in the biological world, given that the structure of human language represents a considerable testimony to human intellectual achievement. The following recommendations, made by the Linguistic Society of America to academic department which include linguistics, are made for the sake of the future of linguistics, with the intent of enriching and preserving linguistics, and will hopefully not be viewed as dictating the details of program curricula.

The LSA recommends that linguistic departments support the documentation and analysis of the full diversity of the languages which survive in the world today, with the highest priority given to the many languages which are closest to becoming extinct, and also to those languages which represent the greatest diversity (e.g., language isolates and languages belonging to un- or under-documented families of languages) . By documentation we mean primarily the recording (on audio or videotape) of a variety of textual styles and grammatical and lexical information from a variety of speakers of all ages. Furthermore, we recommend that this documentation be systematically preserved in a network of repositories which also regulate the availability of this documentation. Departments are encouraged to recognize that a language is a complex system of interfacing components, that the preparation of a grammar of a whole language is an intellectual achievement which requires considerable depth of skill and linguistic expertise, and that the informed collection and analysis of linguistic data is thus a fundamental and permanent contribution to the foundation of linguistics. We urge that this work continue to be recognized as deserving through the awarding of advanced degrees and through favorable hiring, promotion, and/or tenure decisions.