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Meta-documentary linguistics

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Documentary linguistics (or **language documentation**) has been defined by Himmelmann as the subfield of linguistics that is ‘concerned with the methods, tools, and theoretical underpinnings for compiling a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties’ (Himmelmann 2006:v). A similar definition is given by Woodbury (2010:1) as ‘the creation, annotation, preservation, and dissemination of transparent records of a language’. Language documentation is by its nature multidisciplinary, and as Woodbury (2010) notes, it draws on ‘concepts and techniques from linguistics, ethnography, psychology, computer science, recording arts, and more’.

Documentary linguistics has developed over the past 15 years in response to the need to make a lasting record of the world’s endangered languages, and to support speakers of these languages in their desires to maintain them. Its establishment is not only driven by the pressing need to record languages while speakers continue to use them, it is also fuelled by advances in information, media, communication and archiving technologies which make possible the collection, analysis, preservation and dissemination of documentary records in ways which were not feasible previously. Language documentation also fundamentally concerns itself with the rights and needs of language speakers and their direct involvement in the documentation and support of their own languages.

I would like to propose that the time has come for development of a field of **meta-documentary linguistics** which concerns itself with the methods, tools, and theoretical underpinnings for creating, developing, and maintaining a language documentation project (i.e. a field that concerns itself with documentation of the documentation). Development of such a field would go some way to ensuring future preservation of the outcomes of current documentation projects, as well as their sustainability, and help future researchers learn from the work of those presently grappling with issues in language documentation (Austin 2010). Meta-documentary linguistics will need to pay due attention not only to reflexivity of linguists concerning their own documentary models and practices, but also to draw on experiences from neighbouring disciplines, and from considerations that surface in the interpretation of past documentations (legacy materials).

Drawing on my current research (in collaboration with Jeanie Bell) on the Guwamu materials of the late Stephen Wurm recorded in the 1950s, and other legacy research on Australian languages, I will present some ideas about what a field of meta-documentary linguistics might look like.

References

- Austin, Peter K. 2010. Current Issues in Language Documentation. In Peter K. Austin (ed.) *Language Documentation and Description*, Volume 7:12-33. London: SOAS.
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- Woodbury, Tony. 2010. Language documentation. In Peter K. Austin & Julia Sallabank (eds.) *Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.