African Endangered Languages

Review of Endangered Languages in Africa


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This thought provoking volume, edited by Matthias Brenziger, is based on selected papers from the Symposium on Endangered Languages in Africa which was held during the 1997 2nd World Congress of African Linguistics in Leipzig, Germany. Despite the obvious focus on African languages, many of the papers have a broad appeal and should be read by anyone interested in theoretical issues of language loss, shift, contraction, and endangerment. It should be noted that the volume focuses on theoretical issues and therefore few of the papers address issues of language maintenance or language revival. The volume is organized into three main sections. The first section is made up of two papers that stress the importance of studying endangered languages and the processes involved in language loss. The second part contains two papers on the processes involved in language shift and language contraction. The third and largest section contains a variety of papers that are case studies of specific languages or overviews of language status in regions of Africa. In general most of the papers in the volume are well written and argued, provide rich sources of new data from a variety of rarely documented languages, and prove worthwhile resources for those interested in endangered language issues. A sample three of the papers (one from each section) with the broadest application are reviewed in more detail below.

Part 1 Gains from studying endangered languages:
Richard J. Hayward 'Endangered languages of Ethiopia' (17-38), Gabriele Sommer 'Reconstructing the past: Historical linguistics, contact induced change, language shift and relexification' (39-70).

'Endangered languages of Ethiopia', Richard J. Hayward (17-38), makes a case for the need to study endangered languages by discussing in some detail data from several Ethiopian languages. He argues that many of the features of these (and by implication other) endangered languages are so typologically unusual that their undocumented disappear-

ance represents a significant loss to linguistic theory in general. Although this argument is not new, Hayward’s Ethiopian language data itself makes his case quite convincingly. A stunning case is the number system in Bayso, an East Cushitic language. It has three categories: a singular-indeterminate, a small number determinate (paucal) and a large number determinate (plural). Such a system represents a challenge to current number system typologies.

Part 2 On the process of language contraction and language shift: Gerrit Dimmendaal ‘Language contraction versus other types of contact-induced change’ (79-118), Mauro Tosco “People who are not the language they speak” On language shift without language decay in East Africa’ (71-118).

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VW Grant

Documentation of Endangered Languages

The Volkswagen Foundation of Germany is administering a grant for documentation of endangered languages and development of new methods for processing and archiving linguistic and cultural data. This represents a welcome infusion of funds into work on endangered languages. The following information is excerpted from their material. For further information contact the office of the Volkswagen Foundation in Hanover (Dr. Vera Szöllösi-Brenig, phone +49-511-8381-218 or e-mail szooloesl@volkswagen-stiftung.de).

Structure of the Programme

The programme will be divided into a twelve-month initial phase and a subsequent main phase in which projects for documenting endangered languages will be implemented. In parallel with this a multimedia database project providing technical support for language documentation will be initiated. Up to six pilot projects will be supported during the initial phase.

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'Language contraction versus other types of contact induced change', Gerrit Dimmendaal (71-117), is the only paper of the volume that was not presented at the symposium. This comparative work is perhaps the most ambitious and most generally relevant to theoretical issues of language loss, contraction, and reduction. In it Dimmendaal attempts to find crosslinguistic traits that characterize and differentiate language internal change leading to language decline on one hand and contact induced change leading to language shift and loss on the other. The work is divided into two main sections: 1) social background, 2) linguistic structural consequences. Perhaps because of the broad scope of the work, the author provides scant illustrative data, relying instead on more general descriptions of the social and linguistic structural outcomes of language contact. In the section on social factors the author reviews the stages of contact induced language obsolescence as one language takes on an increasingly limited social function from one generation to the next. He contrasts this process with pidginization and creolization. In the section on linguistic structural consequences, the author draws on data from a wide variety of languages to point out that many commonly cited traits of language shift and loss such as phonological attrition, lexical contraction, morphological instability, are not restricted to nor universally present in disappearing languages.

Part 3 Qualitative overviews and case studies of endangered languages in different African regions: David L. Appleyard 'Language death: The case of Qwarenya (Ethiopia)' (119-162), Zeleam Yelew 'Some structural signs of obsolescence in K'emat' (163-186), Roger Blench 'The status of the languages of Central Nigeria' (187-206), Bruce Connell 'Moribund languages of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland' (207-226), Andrew Haruna 'Language death: The case of Buburu in Southern Bauchi area, Northern Nigeria' (227-252), Raimund Kastenhofz 'Language shift and language death among the Mande blacksmiths and leatherworkers in the diaspora' (253-266), Herman M. Batibo 'The fate of the Khoesan languages of Botswana' (267-284).

'Khoesan languages of Botswana', Herman Batibo (267-284), provides an overview of the status of languages of Botswana in which use of Setswana (the national language) is leading to a rapid decline in the remaining 30 or so languages. The decline is particularly notable in Khoisan language communities. He notes that although native Setswana speakers see English as the prestige language, Setswana is the prestige language for most of the other linguistic communities in the country. He briefly discusses some socioeconomic, geographic, and political factors that he sees as contributing to language shift, and presents the results of a survey of attitudes speakers of two Khoisan language communities, |Xaisi and Suakwe. The survey reveals a uniformly negative view of their own languages. The paper is necessarily superficial because of its breadth, but the overview gives the reader an appreciation for the interaction of region-specific and more general factors involved in language shift.
7th Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Conference

May 11-14, 2000, The Toronto Colony Hotel, Toronto, Canada The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

For six years now this conference has provided a unique opportunity for people worldwide to come together to work on practical issues, problems, and solutions to the challenges facing all indigenous languages. This year’s theme is “Language Across the Community,” which will emphasize the many ways in which all community members can become involved in indigenous language activities.

Proposals for Presentation are due March 31, 2000
For further information, contact:
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After October, check the website:
http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/MLC/SILC

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During the main phase multiyear documentation projects, field research visits for the purpose of multimedia data collection will alternate with the computer-aided processing of such data, the objective being the compilation of sets of exemplary documentation of endangered languages.

Project Requirements

During the initial and main phases the support of documentation projects within the framework of this programme shall be contingent upon the following conditions:

1. The degree of endangerment of the language to be documented, the urgency of its need for documentation and its comprehensive documentation capacity shall be evidenced.

2. The qualification of the project members for language documentation purposes shall be demonstrated. Such project members should be qualified academics, preferably from a variety of disciplines (e.g., ethnology/linguistics), with field research experience. If possible, they should possess sufficient knowledge of the relevant contact language. Projects which are implemented within the framework of international academic collaboration, particularly including academics from the host country, will be especially welcomed.

3. In addition, a willingness to process data in accordance with the three key terms of data orientation, multifunctionality and general accessibility is considered to be a prerequisite. Following the completion of the project, the project members will be granted the sole right of access to their data material for a period of up to three years for the purpose of achieving and presenting their own research results (e.g., doctoral thesis).

Research permission and the consent of the relevant language community to the documentation of its language should have been obtained. The institutional prerequisites for the organisational implementation of the documentation project should be in place. Possible centralised archiving notwithstanding, responsibility for the general accessibility of the documentation and continued data maintenance will lie with the applicants.

A willingness to attend conferences within the framework of the programme will be assumed provided that such conferences do not clash with field research visits.

In the case of the pilot projects during the initial phase, a willingness to pass on the operationalizable results will additionally be expected. On the one hand, this will include the submission of a concluding report two months following the completion of the project and, on the other, participation in a workshop for the purpose of evaluating the results and experiences and rendering them utilisable for the main phase.

Funding Possibilities

In accordance with the structure of the programme the following may be funded:

- Initial phase: pilot projects involving a maximum duration of 12 months for the purpose of documenting data material from various language families which, for the most part, already exists; provision of funds to cover personnel costs, travel allowances, particularly for field research, and equipment as well as consumables.
  Application deadline: 1 December 1999

- Initial and main phase: a database project for the purpose of developing a multimedia language documentation representation format and an archiving solution; provision of funds to cover personnel and non-personnel costs and, if applicable, travel allowances.
  Application deadline: 1 December 1999

- Main phase: research projects for a maximum of five years for the purpose of data collection and the documentation of endangered languages; provision of funds to cover personnel costs, travel allowances, particularly for field research, and equipment as well as consumables.
  Application deadline: probably from February 2001 onwards following the evaluation of the results of the initial phase

- Symposia, workshops, and summer schools on documenting endangered languages, or on specific programme-related issues.

Applications

Written applications may be addressed to the Volkswagen Foundation at any time and without particular

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format requirements. In principle, applications from abroad receive equal consideration. They must, however, give detailed information on a defined cooperation with academic institutions or academics in Germany.

Applications should be presented in English and contain the following information:

- Brief title; Abstract (1 - 2 pages); Summary of approximately 10 lines; detailed description (degree of urgency; focal points of documentation; possible special analyses; details of collaboration and contacts with members of the relevant language community and academic institutions in the host country; feasibility details (requisite permission issued by authorities); status of the preliminary activities; current research status); Details on the archiving and accessibility of the relevant documents; Working programme and time schedule; Costs (itemized in terms of personnel and travel expenses, recurring and non-recurring costs of material); Curriculum vitae and list of publications of the key participants; Information whether the same or a similar application has been submitted or is to be submitted to other funding institutions; Designation of the intended grant recipient

Applications for support of symposia, workshops, and summer schools should contain additional information about the:
- programme of the event including lectures and timetables; place, date and duration of the planned event; names of envisaged or invited participants and lecturers; confirmations received from respective speakers.

Additional requirements:

The Foundation can provide funds only to research institutions. Applicants who are not members of universities or research institutions of international renown should also supply details on legal status, statutes, trustees and boards, charitable status, budgeting and auditing of the respective institution. Noninstitutionalised project groups are asked for detailed information on their legal and organisational status. If available, such applicants are required to supply an annual report or a general description of their institutions.