Collect, protect, connect: Innovation and optimism in language and cultural documentation projects

Mark Turin

HAL Id: halshs-03083354

https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03083354

Submitted on 27 Jan 2021

HISTORIES FROM THE NORTH:
ENVIRONMENTS, MOVEMENTS, AND NARRATIVES

Edited by
John P. Ziker and Florian Stammler

CHAPTER 8. Collect, Protect, Connect: Innovation and Optimism in Language and Cultural Documentation Projects

Mark Turin

It is at the request of Piers Vitebsky and Florian Stammler that I have come here today to listen, participate, and speak about a region that has a strong scholarly community and also a set of interconnected networks: the Himalayas. Rather like the Arctic, the Himalayas transcend nation states, in this case from Afghanistan through to India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet. They also transcend established area studies and disciplines, because the traditional domains of South Asian Studies, East Asian Studies, or High Asian Studies do not really fit this regional mountainous area. Perhaps it is despite this, or even because of it, as we fall through the cracks as a region, that the scholarly networks are so active, so well integrated, and also so collaborative. I should also say a particular thank you to our tireless, hardworking interpreters up there. Having worked as translator for the UN myself, I know how invisible and also how important you are. Just one thought about this word "museification" or museums. I think we have to remember that museums are not places any more where objects go to die. They are often at the cutting edge of the relations between native, source communities, and representations of culture. So we might want to reframe museums as dynamic, active locations and not just recipients or repositories of collections.

I borrowed my title "Collect, Protect and Connect" from Sarah Davy, who gave a wonderful talk some time back about the New Zealand film archive, and she in turn borrowed the phrase from the director of the archive. To me, the title sums up some of what we are trying to do here as linguists and anthropologists. I will address here what I call ideologies of endangerment: the ideologies of language endangerment and cultural endangerment, particularly in the form of documentation projects.

Let me start with some sobering facts. How do languages die? There are two probable ways: one is that the people who speak them die; the other is "language shift"—people transitioning to another language. According to their recent atlas, UNESCO classifies one-third of the 6,500 plus human languages as endangered. According to linguists' representations, languages lie on a sliding scale from languages that are "safe" through to ones that are "at risk," "endangered," "moribund," and then finally "extinct." We should also remember that about 95 percent of the world's languages are spoken by just 5 percent of the population, and that the bulk of endangered languages are transmitted exclusively by word of mouth. I would like to focus on this idea of endangerment and also pause to reflect on how the discourse of language endangerment and our choice of terminology convey the urgency of what is often compared to a biological or species model.

The same metaphors for managing and sustaining diversity are invoked to canvas support for both biodiversity programs and language maintenance programs. Examples of words that are used include *language death*, *extinction*, and *linguicide* (the predation of one language on another). The explicit borrowing of terms from the biological world extends to *attrition*, *collapse*, and *loss*. These terms are invoked as a result of the analogy between species and language loss. The analogy is compelling and powerful but remains of limited use because languages are not living organisms—their speakers are. There are no captive breeding programs for languages! Are humans just the vectors for languages, or are languages the cognitive manifestation of our humanity, detached from any speakers?

There is a lot of recent work in areas of biocultural diversity, ecosystems, and languages. Books that came out some years ago show that areas of species diversity (flora and fauna) often overlap with areas of linguistic diversity. While these are certainly interesting ideas, do they serve a useful purpose for linguists and anthropologists classifying, documenting, and working with endangered communities and their speech forms? Language is not culture and culture is not language. There are very close relationships between them—in some situations a correlation of one-to-one between a language group and a cultural community—but not always. If you ask an anthropologist how many cultures there are, most will not want or be able to tell you. They may default instead to a position of informing you how many languages are spoken. In point of fact, if you ask anthropologists around the world, there will be no agreement on how to classify a discrete cultural unit.

What are linguists doing about the threat to over a third of the world's speech forms? There is a resurgence of interest in documentary field linguistic programs, partly due to targeted funding. Two organizations in particular must be given credit for this: the VolkswagenShiftung, and the progressive Rausing Family who support endangered languages work through the School of Oriental and African Studies. The rationale for projects that document languages in the field is threefold. First, there is a sense that languages encode understandings about science, ecology, and ethnobotany, and that these may have some practical utility for humanity as a whole. Second, a motivating factor for linguists is that language is a vehicle and repository for cultural knowledge, and if we do not do something about documenting this, these unique worldviews will disappear with the language's inevitable death. Finally, there is the recognition that endangered languages are meaningful for the understanding of human cognition and the uniqueness of our species. Data from typologically diverse and unusual languages provide insights and shed light on how humans think. It is these three motivational arguments that are used for language documentation projects. Some would say that since there are more linguists than there are languages, if every linguist just documented one speech form, we would have a more robust corpus of data before the window of opportunity closes. Of course, it is not as simple as that, but it is interesting to see how, in the last

decade, what used to be a marginal discipline of documentary linguistics has bounced back through funding, public awareness, and quite a number of high profile and prominent projects.

By and large, we are talking about a community of linguists who were once marginal but are becoming increasingly mainstream, in part through the hot cash injection from some unlikely sources. Technology and funding are helping, partly, to equalize the relationship between the linguist and the studied community. There is something quite ironic in this—we should not forget that the processes of globalization that are eroding languages and speech communities are the very processes that make it possible to visit communities cheaply, work collaboratively, and also produce documents that may survive long-term. There is a paradoxical element in the processes in which we are engaged.

For a decade now I have been working in Nepal with the Thangmi community. The name Thangmi means "barbarian" in Tibetan. From the perspective of central Tibetans, and from the Nepali nation-state, they are the people at the borders; they are marginal. They speak an endangered Tibeto-Burman language that has no script, and most of the men are involved in some kind of portering or wage labor, such as carpentry. Poverty rates are incredibly high in this community. The interest rate is 60 percent a year—cumulative—leading to indentured servitude and abject poverty.

On the right you see a woman wearing a necklace of coins. These were the earnings of her grandfather when he worked in Darjeeling as a porter in British India, and he returned with all of his Indian money as a stash which he kept in his house. He was thought to be the wealthiest man in the village. After that, Indian independence and the Quit India movement resulted in a change of currency. So when her father went back to India years later with all the coins, they were worth nothing; from riches to rags. One interesting feature of the Thangmi community is that they are entirely shamanic. In the Himalayas, it is unusual for shamans to be used for all life cycle and curative rituals.

Let me talk a bit about my book, which I call the "useless dissertation." After about a decade of scholarship, I produced a thousand-page book (Turin 2006) that I brought back to the community, and they said, "That's nice, we can put it on the shelf and show people that we have a big language. What you need to do is produce something that we can use." This was the start of the process of community response. They were interested in my endeavor but realized that the product of my research was not tangible or usable. So we produced a word list. It is a Nepali (the national language)-Thangmi (the ethnic language)-English word list. But when I called it a word list there was a revolt, as the community wanted to call it a dictionary because a dictionary sounds bigger. In addition, I had made a politically sensitive but also quite erroneous move from the position of some of the native speakers. I decided to keep in only what I thought were indigenous, autochthonous or traditional words, words that could be thought of as core lexicon before the rampant loan words from Nepali and borrowings from Tibetan came in. Some people

thought that it was a good idea, but it produced a wafer-thin dictionary. The community response was: "How come when you write it in our language it is [a thin book], but when you write it in your language it is [a thick book]?" There was a sense that I was producing something that had very little political utility at the national level for their claims for ethnic, political, and linguistic recognition.

After that, the community and I became involved with producing materials in the modified Nepali Devanagari script that could be used in non-formal adult education programs. As anybody who works on endangered languages and standardization knows, it is a double-edged sword: when you standardize and scriptualize an unwritten language, something is lost in the process. You risk creating *de facto* standards and removing dialect variation through the very process of documenting it. Such projects should be approached with caution. We also realized that there was nothing to read in this language. You cannot have a written tradition if there is nothing to read. So a number of local intellectuals started writing storybooks about their community in their own tongue and in the Nepali script. One example is a story about a boy going to Kathmandu to work in a restaurant, and another is written by my long-time research assistant and friend. It is the story of us falling down a snow fall together, which produced something that people like to read in the village. After this, we produced a pedagogical tool for schools, realizing that one of the ruptures children experience is when they come from a Thangmi language environment at home to a Nepali language environment in school. This rupture is one that has been documented around the world, and the received understanding was that if you transition kids through their mother tongue into education they might drop out of school less. To this end, a schoolbook was produced.

I should say the Nepali and Indian administrations have been producing curriculum materials in local languages for years, but this usually means translating the national curriculum word-for-word into a local language. This results in cultural inappropriateness, names that do not resonate at all and references to people, clothes, and diet that do not fit locally. We did our best to represent jobs and tasks that people actually do. We commissioned a local artist to produce drawings, poems and stories about objects that people produce in the village. It seems to be working quite well.

That is what linguists are doing. So what are anthropologists doing? I do not mean to say that we are not doing anything, but that we are not very good at coordinating our work. There are a number of funding agencies out there, but very few of them will fund descriptive documentary work in the manner that linguistics is now funded. And while there are pockets of concerned, engaged scholars, often working intensively and in partnership with local communities, such actions do not regularly transcend regional or national boundaries, and they remain housed in regional studies units and in nation-states. I set up the World Oral Literature Project in Cambridge together with an international board as a modest attempt, with some funding from a foundation, to kickstart an initiative to document and make accessible

the endangered oral literatures of the native peoples of the world before they disappear without record. We began earlier this year at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge. The aims of the project are to collect, protect, and connect. By collection we mean the fieldwork, but not only that. What we have discovered that all kinds of scholars, communities, and people have massive collections of oral traditions, epics, songs, and poetry that they have collected and have not done anything with, or that they have transcribed and put in a shoebox. When that person retires, the relative who gets the shoebox thinks, "What do I do with it now?" The collections are therefore not only field-based ones, but include materials sitting around in historical archives and in private collections around the world. "Protection" means stewarding these documents and recordings through to the next generation, making sure they are properly transcribed, migrated, backed up, and looked after.

Connection is the most interesting part. This means bringing the materials to a wider, generally interested public, a scholarly community, and most importantly, to the source communities or heritage communities from which these materials were originally collected. This slide shows a colleague of mine, Alban von Stockhausen, on the left, working with on the right a local researcher, and in the middle their subject—an elder in the village in eastern Nepal where they work. It is this kind of triangulated collaboration that is so interesting and important, because what we have seen among the community of linguists is that people who are, or projects that are, initiated by communities or by local researchers often resonate better with funders and have real meaning and momentum. Projects that work *on* people rather than *with* people are no longer appropriate. This kind of research triangle, where everybody has an agenda, can be very positive and quite exciting.

The term "oral literature" is something that a lot of people find almost oxymoronic. How can it be oral and literature at the same time? Does the move from orality to textuality not echo James Frazer's (1922) imaginings of the transition from magic to world religion? Instead, we must think of oral literature as just as vibrant, dynamic, diverse, and powerful as the written literatures of the Western traditions. Just because it is transmitted orally does not mean that it cannot be epic. Oral literature is precisely that which can fall through the cracks in language documentation projects. Many linguists do like to collect this kind of data, but usually as a corpus; put in as an annotated text at the end, and the stories rarely become part of their own analysis. Anthropologists collect such material but also do not know where to put it in monographs that are necessarily increasingly theoretical. At the World Oral Literature Project, we are committed to trying to find innovative ways of publishing such materials. Why? Simply because oral literature is often lost when a language dies. While a culture can live on, some of these narratives—the gearing that bind cultural groupings together—are often eroded when languages themselves become less widely used. To this end, the project funds fieldwork. We have a small supplemental grants program which I would like people to know about and perhaps apply for. We are developing

publications, occasional lectures and workshops, and are building up an online and offline archive. We also host yearly workshops, bringing together local scholars, native communities, anthropologists, archivists, and librarians.

I have been very interested to see over the last few years how digital humanities projects and particularly documentation projects are bringing in librarians and archivists as partners in our the wider endeavor. If you build in specialist colleagues from the beginning, there is a better chance that your materials will stand the test of time and also be curated in a sensible and responsible manner. We have also discovered that while there are lots of open source databases out there now which inform you about levels of language endangerment such as Ethnologue and UNESCO, we still do not have access to information on what level of documentation has already occurred. For those of you who are familiar with the Ethnologue, in most cases documentation or written form means some kind of translation into scripture, which for the purposes of anthropology is simply insufficient.

What is the correlation between language endangerment and cultural documentation? Sometimes one discovers very small speech communities that are very well documented. This is a very interesting correlation to be aware of as well. We have also noticed in the last few years that the public are genuinely interested in this story. Every week in a British newspaper there is a piece announcing "Last speaker of X dies" or something about Cornish or Welsh; there is a groundswell of public interest in language endangerment and language policy. But at the center of oral literature lies a performer, and the rights of a performer in terms of his or her intellectual property, ownership, and also being credited for their own particular performance if that is culturally appropriate, and these themes are very important to our project. We have been surprised and delighted to receive emails from people across the world, and to be receiving care packages from scholars in quite unlikely corners, from Mexico all the way through to southern India. When somebody sends me a box of their materials and writes, "What a relief you're around! It is no longer my responsibility; it is yours," it is exciting to be a part of something where you have reached out to a community you did not know existed. Thank you.

References

Frazer, James George
1922 [1890] The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion. New York: MacMillan.

Turin, Mark
2006 A Grammar of the Thangmi Language with an Ethnolinguistic Introduction to the Speakers and their Culture. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Descriptive and Comparative Linguistics. Leiden University.

Comments

Florian Stammler: Thank you very much, Mark Turin, for these fascinating insights from a region which is not in the North. Your personal development as a researcher from documenting a language to active collaboration and community development shows the creative potential that unfolds so well when we stop complaining about loss and do something new with what we have. To link yours and Nakhshina's presentation, the point is the unraveling of the creative potential of that which remains.

Patty Gray: Mark, you spoke about collaboration in a way that I just love. I think there are different ways of thinking about collaboration. One way that I do not like as much is to presume that I the researcher have sublimated my own agenda and that makes me upset because I am really doing what the community wants, and what you said was that everybody has an agenda; there is no reason to submerge it, and if you can be very explicit about it, you can negotiate all sides, and I think that is the most healthy form of collaboration. There is no reason to be afraid as a researcher to sort of say, "I have an agenda; what is yours? Let's work it out." I think that is what works, right?

Mark Turin: Thank you. I feel that as social scientists we are so insightful and critical about so many things, but sometimes quite implicit about some of our own agendas. I think it is very important that we make such intents clear. Plus, what I think does not work is an application that has at the end an appendix which states, "And then I'll give my findings back." I mean, that just does not wash anymore. The default option for many people in many fields over the years has been that collaboration is so contested, so political, so messy that it is easier to not bother and put it aside. We are trained to see all the problems and we just put our hands up in despair. And that kind of numbing inaction, I believe, is also no longer an option; in fact, not returning, not working with people, is as much a choice as working with people. We have to be explicit about that, and I believe that the whole field is changing enormously fast around us. We are part of that process and that is exciting. If you capitalize on that moment you can do a great deal, but again some people will shrink from it in fear of where it may lead.

Florian Stammler: This topic of researchers' agendas and "usefulness" is very timely also in northern Europe. Questions such as who decides research agendas in the Sami area, or among Canadian, Russian or Alaskan indigenous Arctic inhabitants are continuously hotly debated. In many cases this is vital because it decides whether or not somebody gets a research permit. In Russia, often you have to apply for permission from the FSB secret service or regional authorities. In North America you need permission from councils of elders, and in Sapmi you are well advised to have your research idea supported by the Sami Council.