

Documentary Linguistics Workshop: Its Beginning, Development, and Future

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This paper traces the history of the Documentary Linguistics Workshop to provide the background context and underlying motivations for the development of the workshop series.

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1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to provide information about the academic and historical context in which the Documentary Linguistics Workshop (DocLing) was created and developed over the years. It is hoped that this paper will help readers better understand the needs and motivations that led to the initiation of the workshop series.

2. How it started: Context of the development of DocLing

First, I would like to describe the context in which the plan for the DocLing was developed in 2007. Documentary linguistics (or language documentation) as an academic research field has evolved out of traditional descriptive research on endangered languages. It is therefore useful to look at the changes progressing in endangered languages research at the time.

2.1. Trends in research on endangered languages

As the worldwide problem of language endangerment was rapidly intensifying, research on endangered languages was moving into a new era. The combination of the shrinking domain of use and the decline in the number of speakers drastically undercut the vitality of traditional languages in socially underprivileged minority communities. This development posed problems to two key areas of the study and revitalization of endangered languages.

One problem was affecting academic research for describing endangered languages. It had become rare to find opportunities for conducting field research in consultation with fluent speakers with rich firsthand knowledge of the traditional culture. Researchers were finding themselves relying more on previously published work and unpublished notes and records left by other researchers. Thus, archive research was becoming an important part of their research on endangered languages (see Nakayama 2007).

The other problem was affecting the local communities, particularly the efforts to preserve and revitalize the traditional languages. When it is spoken in everyday lives, a language is something that can be produced endlessly by its speakers. However, once the number of speakers falls below the critical point, it becomes difficult to obtain necessary information and resources about the language within the community. This makes it necessary for communities to look for information in outside sources, which are most commonly academic publications and unpublished materials collected by academics.

Thus, now that the opportunity for collecting firsthand information on traditional languages has become rare, the values of field research and its records are much higher and extend well beyond researchers' immediate goals and concerns. There are and there will be researchers with various interests in a language who want and need to rely on the records collected in someone else's fieldwork. Additionally, local community activists will look at such records for the information they need for their work to preserve and revitalize the language of their ancestors.

Linguistic records are now surrounded by a diverse range of needs, and at the same time, there is a growing expectation that academic researchers will contribute directly to, and make a tangible impact on, the situation in the endangered language community rather than simply advancing purely academic research and analyses (i.e., studying "about" the language and community). We could also say that the scarcity of data collection opportunities has created a strong need for authentic firsthand data that can be utilized for a variety of purposes. This attention to the needs of preservation and revitalization activities in the communities and also to the needs for multipurpose records was at the core of development of the documentary linguistic research paradigm.

The conceptual and methodological framework of documentary linguistics was

developed around the end of the 20th century, and the research was gaining momentum throughout the early 2000s as major sources of research funding started supporting documentary linguistic projects throughout the world. Such sources include the Documentation of Endangered Languages program in Germany, the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme in the United Kingdom, and the Documenting Endangered Languages grant program in the United States (Austin 2014). The field of documentary linguistics was reasonably well established and expanding its reach in the western world by the time the DocLing Workshop was developed in 2007.

2.2. Academic environment in Japan

Japan has a strong and long-standing academic tradition of fieldwork-based descriptive research. It was therefore no coincidence that when language endangerment became a major global issue in the late 1990s, Japan was among the first to respond with a launch of a large-scale project. The project, the Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim (ELPR) Project, was one of the most notable and influential developments in the recent history of descriptive linguistic research in Japan. ELPR was a large-scale five-year project funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. It was launched in 1999 as a response to the growing global concern about language endangerment and was focused on field linguistic research on languages of the Pacific Rim region, with a particular emphasis on severely endangered languages. ELPR provided much-needed financial support to academic research on endangered languages and helped produce a wide range of materials, including text collections, grammatical descriptions, dictionaries and word lists, and collections of research papers.

With a large-scale descriptive research initiative like ELPR, it may appear that the development of active research programs in documentary linguistics was inevitable and well supported in Japan. However, this was not necessarily the case.

One of the issues was that the conceptual framework of documentary linguistics had not made its way into Japan. Endangered language research in Japan generally kept focusing on academic and descriptive research. There was an almost exclusive emphasis on analyses and grammatical descriptions rather than data themselves. There was interest in the collection of textual materials as a part of descriptive studies. However, textual materials were valued more as illustrations of grammatical rules and structure than as representative records of how language was being used. Thus, the data were considered valuable only in their relation to a grammatical description and were not necessarily valued themselves.

Another issue was the insufficient training opportunities in graduate programs. There were few graduate programs in Japan that could provide training in fieldwork-based linguistic research, let alone in documentary linguistics. It was almost impossible to obtain from graduate programs a systematic training in documentary linguistic theory or methodology. The issue was further complicated because of a lack of a community

of field linguists. There was not much of a network among field linguistics researchers beyond personal connections between individuals. Consequently, opportunities for information exchange and mutual support were limited. This situation posed a serious problem, particularly for students who were in small graduate programs. Such students did not have anyone to obtain advice from or consult with.

Thus, the foundation for the development of documentary linguistic research in Japan was not secure at all. It is true that the same problem exists elsewhere, but the situation was particularly serious in Japan. In other words, the prospect of the development of documentary linguistic research itself was endangered.

2.3. Linguistic Dynamics Science Project and DocLing as a response

The Linguistic Dynamics Science Project (LingDy), the project through which DocLing has been offered, was initiated to address issues that are hampering the development of documentary linguistics research in Japan. These are large and complex problems, and it is not possible to solve them in one go. Therefore, we have been focusing on the following four areas: (1) raising the profile of documentary linguistics research; (2) raising the awareness of the needs and values for a comprehensive record of the use of a language that can be utilized for a wide range of purposes (not only for linguistic analysis and description but also for language conservation and revitalization); (3) building capacity, especially that of junior researchers, in documentary linguistics research; (4) building a lasting academic infrastructure and collaboration network in documentary linguistics.

There are two reasons that we focused our attention on capacity building and infrastructure. First, the lack of training opportunities and support structure for documentary linguistic work was a critical problem in Japan that required immediate attention. Second, we needed to build self-sustaining growth mechanisms if we hoped to secure the long-lasting growth of documentary linguistic research. We needed to produce more researchers who could support themselves (i.e., who had relevant training and experience to secure funding for continuing documentary linguistic research). We also needed to build infrastructure and a research network that functioned as a mutual support mechanism for researchers. DocLing was developed as a centerpiece of the capacity building activity of LingDy.

3. Nine years of DocLing

The DocLing Workshop was first planned in fall 2007 as the LingDy project was undergoing preparation to start its operations in April 2008. The realization of the first workshop, as well as all the iterations that followed, was made possible by the full cooperation of Peter Austin and David Nathan at SOAS (formerly known as the School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, who provided generous assistance in all aspects of the workshop from planning to instruction.

The first DocLing was held in February 2008 with 10 participants. The three-and-half day program covered a wide range of topics: the definition of documentary linguistics; creation of a corpus of linguistic data; audio recording; audio data transcription; data format and data management; software tools for data analysis; data archiving; mobilization of language data (creation of learning materials for language revitalization); grant proposal writing skills; and research ethics.

DocLing got a solid budgetary foundation when the LingDy project started in April 2008. The workshop series is now also a part of the training program scheme of the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA). This demonstrates a high level of commitment to training in documentary linguistics on the part of ILCAA.

We were able to expand DocLing gradually over the years as additional budgetary and administrative support became available. Starting with the 2010 workshop, we added Anthony Jukes to the regular teaching staff, expanding the workshop to four full days. This allowed us to add a component on video recording to the program. The teaching staff continued to grow: Sonja Riesberg, Hideo Sawada, and Toshihide Nakayama joined the regular staff, and we were also fortunate to have the participation of Nikolaus Himmelmann, John Bowden, and Honoré Watanabe.

The workshop program was substantially revised and expanded in 2011. It grew to a seven-day program and included work with language consultants who were speakers of minority languages. DocLing, since its second workshop, incorporated a group project component where participants engage in small-scale language documentation projects to actively utilize the knowledge and skills that they acquired in the lectures. However, the involvement of language consultants turned out to be one of the most significant improvements we could make to the workshop over the years: it had a substantial positive impact on the quality of the participants' learning experience by adding a high level of reality to the work that participants engaged in. The involvement of language consultants had an additional, equally important value: providing members of endangered language communities with an opportunity to participate in the workshop, allowing them to gain knowledge and skills useful for their language documentation and to participate in revitalization activities in their home communities. In that sense, this scheme served a double purpose, to improve the quality of learning experiences and to extend the reach of the workshop into language communities. Another recent successful addition to the program was individualized consultation sessions where participants could consult the instructors and support staff members for advice and assistance on their concerns and project ideas. This allowed us to provide participants with individualized assistance and learning experiences.

The profile of participants has also changed over the nine years. In the early years of DocLing, participants were mostly graduate students in descriptive linguistics from Tokyo and its surrounding areas. However, the range of participants the workshop attracts has broadened significantly since then. Now we regularly receive inquiries

and applications not only from all over Japan but also from other parts of the world. Moreover, the composition of participants is much more diverse, including dialect study researchers, sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, ethnographers, and language activists. We also have had “repeaters” who came back to participate in the workshop multiple times.

4. Impact

Nine years ago, we set out to create DocLing with the goal of raising the profile of newly growing documentary linguistic research and to provide training opportunities and a place to get connected to other researchers with similar orientations. Although it is not easy to trace the exact amount of progress, it seems safe to say that we have made good progress toward these goals.

During these nine years, we trained about 150 participants. Many participants from the early years hold academic positions, and now their students have started to participate in the workshop. Participants are sometimes asked to offer a short workshop or lecture on documentary linguistic methodology. Thus, the benefits of the workshop are reaching beyond the participants themselves. Now the terms “documentary linguistics” or “language documentation” are commonly heard in conversation between researchers on fieldwork-based linguistics, especially those working on endangered languages and dialects. DocLing must have played a meaningful, if not exclusive, role in bringing about this situation.

The more tangible impact is felt in the changes in us. When we started organizing DocLing, we at ILCAA did not have the knowledge and abilities necessary for offering such workshop ourselves, and we had to rely on assistance and cooperation from Peter Austin and David Nathan on all aspects of the workshop. Through the nine years of DocLing, we have accumulated enough expertise to provide our own services and contributions: holding a number of language documentation workshops in Indonesia and Russia; organizing the Documentary Linguistics Seminar for the University of Hong Kong; organizing the Language Documentation Workshop for Japanese dialect researchers in collaboration with the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics; and participating in training activities at international workshops such as the Institute on Field Linguistics and Language Documentation and the Institute on Collaborative Language Research.

5. The future

The DocLing workshop series has been a great success, and we think that we have achieved good results, especially in regard to improving researchers’ capabilities. However, there are some limitations to the current form of the workshop. The most important among them is the limitation with regard to making a direct impact

on language documentation and revitalization activities in endangered language communities. This is an important issue, especially now that the focus of the host project, LingDy, has been shifted to capacity building in language communities.

We are now making a great deal of effort to collaborate with other institutions and with speaker communities to extend training opportunities to other parts of the world, especially to endangered language communities. The traditions of the DocLing workshop are being carried over into the new era.

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