

Book Review

José Antonio Flores Farfán and Fernando Ramallo (eds.). *New perspectives on endangered languages.* Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2010.

This well-structured volume revolves around an important set of questions: what does it mean to “document” a language? And why should such an enterprise be engaged in at all? What specific problems are raised by the documentation of endangered languages, where revitalization may be an issue, as opposed to languages in general? How do these questions fit into sociolinguistics as a field of inquiry?

The book contains eight chapters, starting with an overview by book editors Flores Farfán and Ramallo, who propose a synthetic treatment of the theoretical dimensions raised by the problem at hand. They highlight the two traditions that have developed in language documentation: one which they characterize as community-oriented, and one which approaches documentation as an essentially self-contained scientific project. This contrast – which they wisely present as a continuum rather than black-and-white categories – raises the question of the linkage between the practice of (socio-)linguists and the needs of the communities concerned; it ties in with the contested paradigm of language ecology (first introduced by Haugen in 1972, and abundantly debated since then; see e.g. Edwards 2007; Creese et al. 2009). In this volume, documentation itself is viewed as part of this ecology.

Although they sometimes perform, in their opening discussion, the sort of logical leap occasionally encountered in critical discourse analysis – namely, a tendency to (mis-)interpret focus on topic “T” as exclusion of topics other than “T” – Flores Farfán and Ramallo do an excellent job of highlighting the ways in which documentation, as an intellectual and political stance, is intended to be distinct from traditional descriptive linguistics. The documentation approach helps to remind us of important sociolinguistic results, such as the fact that the “ideal” speaker does not exist; it aims at a broad understanding of language in real communities and real interactions. The editors discuss the links between documentation and revitalization projects, which in turn may “[give] rise to new (power) epistemologies in the making of research” (p. 4).

Flores Farfán and Ramallo emphasize situations in which linguists describe or document relatively “unknown” languages (unknown from the standpoint of mainstream academia, of course). This leads them to view any quest for a standard as *a priori* suspect, on the grounds that this may well be a projection of the

linguist, embodying power relations and indexing particular forms, including plainly artificial ones, in one way or another. However, this need not always be the case. For example, linguistic documentation may very well take place in communities who view themselves as speaking a variant of an established form (which the linguist herself may know well); the goal of linguistic documentation, possibly along with the intent to make a modest contribution to the conditions that are more conducive to revitalization in that particular context, may legitimately (without passing judgement) raise questions of proximity to, or distance from, an established standard. This point in fact turns up in Dorian's contribution in the volume, who quotes the case of Welsh (e.g. Jones, 1997), but examples abound – for example the study of speech forms found in varieties of Irish, or even local variants of a major language like French (Cerquiglini et al. 2000), including variants that are seriously endangered.

Most of the rest of the book is devoted to case studies on Manambu in Papua New Guinea, by Alexandra Aikhenvald, Kuikuro in Amazonia, by Bruna Franchetto, Evenki across Siberia, by Lenore Grenoble, Uchumataqu on the Bolivian *altiplano*, by Pieter Muysken, and Awetí in the Upper Xingu region of Central Brazil, by Sabine Reiter. Beyond case-specific investigations, all these contributions address theoretical issues. The third chapter, by Nancy Dorian, stands out in that it does not focus on a particular language or community, but investigates an important transversal matter, discusses the respective functions of the private and public spheres as sources of information in documentation and revitalization. The book closes with a brief piece by the two book editors with a vibrant call for the integration of recent sociolinguistic advances and more traditional documentary linguistics, a development which will require not only methodological and epistemological open-mindedness among scholars of different stripes, but also genuine cooperation with the language communities concerned.

It would not be possible to do justice here to the wealth of case-specific information that this book offers. But one of its chief assets lies with the fact that all of its chapters address fundamental questions with relevance that goes well beyond the specific cases used to exemplify them. These qualities are best brought forward by focusing on these transversal issues, instead of going through the book chapter by chapter.

Of particular interest is the recurring notion of value. It is mentioned most directly in Muysken's contribution (aptly subtitled "values and actors"), which opens with the question: "What is a language worth (and here 'worth' can be defined in many ways) to whom?" (p. 93). This amounts to a pithy summary of core interrogations that turn up in sociolinguistics, in documentation, and in language policy and planning – including, of course, when its aim is language revitalization. Muysken's convincing advocacy of actor-centered approaches is

backed up by a balanced account of contrasting discourses on linguistic diversity. The issue of value, however, also explicitly turns up in other pieces, like Aikhenvald's study of Manambu: it is the value *assigned* to the language by speakers themselves that creates the context on which investment of social resources in school-based revitalization efforts can bank. This neatly exemplifies findings from different disciplinary perspectives, such as Fishman's (1977) "phenomenology", as well as approaches using economics and policy analysis to assess the success conditions for minority language protection and promotion (see below).

Nancy Dorian's analysis of the transferability (or sometimes lack of transferability) between documentation of language usage and language use in private and public contexts is particularly illuminating. This contrast is skillfully exploited to discuss issues as varied as trust (between informants and researchers), responsibility (which befalls the researcher, confronting her with hard choices even when all kinds of precautions have been taken to respect the informants' social context), appropriateness of language registers or variants, intergenerational transmission, and corpus development; this chapter may be considered a "must-read" for students in language policy courses.

Representations of the language (held by community members) are an essential dimension of sociolinguistic context, as well as a crucial determinant of the chances for language protection and promotion (twin terms which, for reasons not central to the purposes of this review, I consider more apposite than "revitalization"). Bruna Franchetto's discussion of the relationship of the Kuikuro to their language shows how – in that specific context – the non-objectification of language has worked to the community's advantage, allowing them greater control over the language as an element of social construction and reproduction.

The contributions by Lenore Grenoble (on Evenki) and Sabine Reiterer (on Awatí), while very classic in their approach, provide a more direct link to explicit enterprises of language protection and promotion. Such approaches are particularly useful for deepening our knowledge of *how* to connect micro-level with macro-level processes (traditionally a weaker aspect of many language policy plans), while duly taking account of the contextual elements within which such processes unfold. These insights may be applied, for example, to educational development (as is done in the first of these two papers), or the role of common cultural references and institutions potentially straddling language divisions (as shown in the second).

The book reads easily, although in one or two chapters, more sustained attention to language editing would have prevented some solecisms, or the occasional turn of phrase that can blur the intended message. Beyond these minor lapses, the form of this 150-page volume is pleasant, and its internal structure makes it easy for the reader to access reflections focusing on specific facets of language

documentation. However, the relevance of this volume has to do not only with these well-targeted pieces, but also with the fact that they all relate to the broader issues at hand. This bridge-building effort is precisely what characterizes the better books around, raising them above the self-referential tone sometimes encountered in otherwise interesting works.

For example (and from the standpoint of this reviewer) the book may be particularly useful for scholars and officers in the field of language policy selection, design and evaluation, in that it eloquently presents the complexities of actual language use (renewing, as it were, the Fishmanian concept of “language-in-society”, *with* the hyphens). This book can help language policy specialists make appropriate allowance, in their own policy analyses and proposals, for the role of variables that might otherwise be neglected in the very macro-level approaches that language policy work typically encourages. One minor query, in the eyes of this reviewer, is precisely that some contributions in the volume might have been a little more outward-looking in their bridge-building. This would have allowed fruitful connections to be made with the literature in language policy evaluation, in which the protection and promotion of endangered languages is typically approached from a macro perspective. In the initial stages of this line of research over thirty years ago (e.g. Hocevar 1975), the emphasis was almost exclusively on the formulation of models of language dynamics, with a chief concern for logical rigor and internal consistency in modeling. However, as this type of analysis progresses and some key concepts are being established, the need for a stronger sociolinguistic anchoring of the causal relationships at hand has become more explicit. This is reflected in the fact that for a number of years, formalized approaches have been incorporating various meta-level variables for which the studies in this volume provide numerous illustrations (see, for example, Grin and Vaillancourt 1999), confirming the relevance of the more macro approaches.

Thus, one central challenge regarding endangered languages today is how to tie the macro with the micro, the systemic with the individual – without losing sight of the interests of the communities concerned. By addressing issues at the crossroads of several major political and intellectual issues in language policy, language politics, and diversity, this book makes an important contribution in this direction; it deserves to be brought to the attention of a wide range of audiences from different fields of specialization.

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