Ethical practices in language documentation and archiving

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photo: Alan Boraas
Documentation is based upon personal relationships
Archiving is an integral part of language documentation

- documentation without archiving is of limited value
- archiving task must be delegated
  - linguists don’t have adequate resources to archive
  - linguists are mortal
From field to archive

- speech
- community
- documentation
- archive
Ethics in language documentation

- 2-party issue: speakers and linguists
- basic principles founded on personal code of ethics
  - informed consent
  - give something back
  - preserve and provide access to data
- many excellent sources
  - Newman & Ratcliff 2001
  - Shopen 1979
Ethics in language archiving

- 3-party issue: speakers, linguists, archives
- good intentions don’t always translate well
  - linguists (usually) want to do the right thing
  - but may not be able to effectively guarantee
- pragmatic concerns
  - decisions about what is “right” must be delegated through a third party, the archive, which must adhere to established standards for access
Archiving itself is an ethics issue

speech communities demand proper preservation of and access to language documentation materials
A call for preservation

You guys I want to put this in your heart, in your mind. That one day—how many recordings I make for you? Respect, take care. Don’t say “I lost that recording” My words are very strong words, you gotta keep that recording.

Ellen Demit
(Healy Lake, Alaska)
A call for access

You know, all these recordings … if we don’t get it out and learn about it, where are we going to learn from? These are old recordings. We want to get it out and teach our younger children what the elder people are talking about. I think that’s a very good idea for getting it free so we can listen to them.

Andrew Balluta
Complex chain of access

speech community → speaker → linguist → archive

archive → research community → public
The problem

- institution (archive) responsible for providing access
- individual (linguist) has best knowledge of access rights
- where access rights are not sufficiently documented, *both* preservation and access may be jeopardized
Example 1: no permissions

- Archive holds recordings obtained without documented permissions
- Speaker, depositor, and close relatives now deceased
- Community would like access to recordings for revitalization project
- Archive legal counsel advises against providing access
Example 2: no provision for inheritance

- archive holds recordings with permission to make them available to "community members"
- telephone call from person claiming to be community member and wanting access
- who verifies membership?
Legal and ethical issues are intertwined

- Legal -- what people can do
  - varies by jurisdiction
  - usually involves money
  - impinge more on institutions (archives)

- Ethical -- what people should do
  - generally agreed moral principles
  - more important in the non-profit domain
  - impinge more on linguists
Recommendations

Before beginning a documentation project
  – develop an archiving plan in consultation with
    • language archive
    • language community
  – obtain informed consent
  – secure and document permissions
Deed of Gift / License Agreement

- permits explicit specification of access restrictions
- provisions for future control of access restrictions
- permits copying and transfer of media
Seek local guidelines

Assembly of Alaska Native Educators

- “Linguists can help strengthen heritage languages through ... assist[ing] in the conservation and preservation of heritage language materials, including appropriate media and storage facilities.”

- “Researchers may increase their cultural responsiveness through ... ensur[ing] controlled access for sensitive cultural information....”
Respect moral rights

“right to claim authorship … and to object to any distortion, mutilation, or other modification of, or other derogatory action…” (Liberman 2000)
Think long-term

- make archiving an integral part of the documentation process
- encourage speech community to develop procedures for long-term preservation and access
- document access rights
References

Policies of individual archives: AILLA, DOBES, PARADISEC
IASA (2002) Copyright and other intellectual property rights
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