P2

Merging Signed and Spoken Language Documentation

Samantha Rarrick
(University of Hawai'i at Manoa, USA)

ABSTRACT

While language documentation and conservation is a growing field, historically there has been a split between sign language documentation and spoken language documentation (Schembri 2010; Sze et al. 2012; Zeshan 2007). However both of these subfields can lend insights to the other. In this presentation, I (1) make recommendations for sign language researchers working in an area with an endangered spoken language, (2) make recommendations for spoken language researchers who come across an endangered sign language drawing on findings from a project in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and (3) address how language documentation training programs vary for signers versus speakers based on successes and failures in training language users to document their own languages in a university-sponsored project.

Merging sign and spoken language documentation is vital for furthering best practices in language documentation and for understanding what is common and what is possible in languages (Zeshan 2007). Additionally, there are many communities for which holistic language documentation means addressing both spoken and signed languages. While many linguistic researchers tend to focus on either spoken or signed languages, there are manageable ways to address both within a single project. Firstly, a team-based approach to language documentation is often a viable option, where researchers from different subfields collaborate on a single project which may address more than one language within a given community. When working as a team is not feasible and a researcher does not have expertise or research interests in both signed and spoken languages, archived and accessible video recordings of a language or variety can facilitate future research. Such recordings can be crucial, especially for highly endangered languages (Bird & Simons 2003). This presentation will make recommendations for best practices for recording in such situations based on findings from an ongoing spoken language documentation project in Papua New Guinea. Through this video-based documentation project, a previously unknown sign language was uncovered and additional efforts to document this signed language are currently underway (Rarrick & Asonye 2017). Finally, training language users to document their own languages can be both culturally appropriate and efficient. This presentation will discuss best practices for initiating programs with speakers and signers, drawing on the necessary revisions for curricula found when transitioning between working with speakers to signers in such a program at the University of Hawai'i (Rarrick & Wilson 2015). Through combining signed and spoken language documentation efforts, we have the opportunity to further our field's understanding of the features of language and to fine tune best practices for language documentation. This presentation aims to demonstrate that such a merger is both necessary and feasible.