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Abstract
Guidelines for Spoken Language Fieldworkers

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The dramatic loss of linguistic diversity has spurred a number of funding initiatives for the documentation of endangered languages. In the past 10-15 years language documentation projects have been conducted all over the world.

However, the many documentation projects are based on a traditional understanding of language as a purely auditory phenomenon out of which a system has to be derived for description. The fundamental multimodal nature of language does not play a central role in the documentary activities. The endangerment of sign language has been similarly ignored and the phenomenological evidence sign languages can provide with regard to questions like the basic ingredients of language, the evolution of language and universality versus diversity is not recognized. At this stage we have little information about the number of sign systems and languages used in the world today. This presentation today aims to counter this situation. Many field linguists who work on spoken languages often encounter signers in the field but neither approach nor contact sign language linguists who could begin to document it.

In this presentation we show how to help registering sign languages and how to do first steps in documentation. We will discuss and provide guidelines on how to approach signing groups and communities in the field. We will cover topics like how to determine the status of the sign language and its implications, how to create a sign use map and how to video record language use and use basic elicitation techniques.

The aim is to lower the threshold for spoken language linguists to approach sign languages and, by increasing cooperation between sign language and spoken language linguists, to prepare the ground for further documentation in the future.