

A critical review of Current Issues in Language Documentation by Peter K. Austin

In this essay, I will be reviewing Peter K. Austins' research on language documentation and the current issues that it currently faces. The article, published in Language Documentation and Description, vol 7, was an introduction to the branch of linguistics today referred to as "language documentation" or "documentary linguistics," outlining its key concepts and illustrative applications. In this paper, Peter K. Astin aims to explain language documentation and show its growing importance for current, and future linguists, as well as cover what he believes, are the main problems with the current procedures in place. Peter also takes a look within the article at a few current difficulties in the language documentation field of linguistic documentation, including those that are currently being studied. An argument is made that descriptive linguistics and language documentation are complementary endeavours that can cross-pollinate with one another after the differences are highlighted.

Language documentation is a branch of linguistics that looks at the methods, tools, and theories behind making a record of a natural language or one of its variations that is accurate, long-lasting, and useful for many purposes. According to the article, the language documentation is thought to have been created 27 years ago, in 1995. Language documentation was directly responding to the crisis facing the world's endangered languages, of which about half may disappear in the 21st century, and the urgent need to record and analyse languages and speakers' linguistic knowledge while they are still spoken. They also work with communities on supporting threatened languages before opportunities to do so become lessened.

Peter's research explored a number of reasons why language documentation has emerged and grown in significance over the past 27 years (15 years at the time of writing). The first is the growing concern among linguists and others about the crisis facing the world's languages and the threats to linguistic diversity, including the possibility that 50 to 90 per cent of the 7,000 languages currently spoken on earth will no longer be passed on to children or used by anyone by the end of this century. Losing languages is a casualty that happens when other languages become more common and less-used languages are not used as much for communication. There have been other investigations into the disappearance of languages. Noah Tesch, in an article titled 'Why do languages die?' concluded it is due to

Most languages, though, die out gradually as successive generations of speakers become bilingual and then begin to lose proficiency in their traditional languages. This often happens when speakers seek to learn a more prestigious

*language in order to gain social and economic advantages or to avoid discrimination.*¹

I personally have first-hand experience of this situation as a first-generation immigrant from Nigeria; even though I was born in the country, I can not speak my native language, Igbo. I can understand the language when spoken to me, but I cannot speak it nor articulate a translation to another individual. When I arrived in the country over 15 years ago, it was strongly advised I only speak English, as ESL teachers thought speaking in both my native language and English would hinder my ability to learn English thoroughly. Though my family gave pushback, it was ultimately decided that English was the more beneficial language to know as there was more use for it in the world in comparison to my native language, which is only relevant within our small village back in Nigeria. If I do have children in the future, I will not pass on my language, as I don't know it.

The second reason given within the article was the fact that linguists have shown a growing interest, both in theoretical research and in linguistic typology, in incorporating data from as wide a variety of languages as possible to ensure that claims about human language and linguistic abilities are neither genetically nor inherently biased but instead represent the true diversity of the human language capacity.

I found this reason interesting and pieced together that it was just like how we document history. Linguists of the future would not be able to prove the language ever existed if there was no record of it. On the other hand, when it comes to the area of language

mapping, when looking into the history of how a language came to be and what languages blended together to create the current language, it would be increasingly difficult or near impossible if no documentation of language existed; to prevent this from happening, documentation of past languages is essential.

Third, there has been a shift toward a more humanistic view of language, which puts more emphasis on how language is used instead of how it is put together. Language teachers, including those who teach it as a secondary language, have adopted a humanistic approach to teaching. The humanistic approach, according to the British Council,

‘Humanistic language teaching is an approach based on the principle that the whole being, emotional and social, needs to be engaged in learning, not just the mind.’²

In recent years, we have seen a shift in how language is taught in schools and classrooms. Previously, language teachers and schools refused to have students use their mother tongue in classrooms, but in recent years, schools and educators have come to the understanding that it is not necessarily a disadvantage for the mother tongue to be used. As ESL instruction becomes more creative, educators have realised that students learn languages differently, and that one method may be more of a disadvantage, and that completely overriding the native tongue may be detrimental in the future for communication in their own country or connecting with others who speak the language. Also, they understand that their aim is to teach a second language, not replace the first one.

The final reason given in the paper is the availability of large amounts of money as more and more countries begin to realise that they are losing diversity in languages and the native languages within their lands are being forgotten due to multiple factors for which funding has become widely available. Technological advances in areas like digital recording equipment, portable computers, software tools, and storage devices have made it possible to record and analyse a lot more data and access and link it in ways that were impossible before.

As varied as the languages are, their preservation is currently a concern. In my long research on language documentation, I found that there are three main parts: collecting data (recording, photographing, putting together written documents, etc.), processing data (analysing, systematising, transcribing, translating, etc.), and storing data (archiving). In the paper, Peter further identifies two other components:

*Adding value – the transcription, translation, annotation and notation and linking of metadata to the recordings and mobilisation - creation, publication and distribution of outputs in a range of formats for a range of different users and uses.*³

Within the two additional areas Peter identified in his paper, mobilisation stood out to me the most. Often, it is hard for linguists to gather data due to a lot of the data still being in paper form, which makes it delicate to touch but also means multiple people cannot use it at a time (unless they decide to work in partnership to use it together). Making texts and translations available online opens many doors in further research of the language,

but also aids in its preservation as easy access to documents, making it easier and more approachable for others to look into even if they are not linguists and want to understand specific languages more or learn one.

Four challenges are highlighted within the article about the documentation of languages: (1) the quality and quantity of the documentary record; (2) interdisciplinarity and cross-discipline collaboration; (3) meta-documentation; and (4) recruitment, training, and sustainability. Though Peter admitted that there would undoubtedly be more to come as time passed, the main issue I found while reading the article was human error. Finding information is often not demanding in terms of quantity, but finding quality information that answers the questions an individual is looking for is often difficult. It calls into question whether the quality of the languages and the information we gather about them is of high quality. In terms of human error in recruitment, training, and sustainability, as previously discussed in the review, it takes a team of researchers to document a language, and there are currently more languages in dire need of documentation than researchers. In the area of training new graduates/researchers, there are also concerns about biased research and how exactly a student is trained to document languages.

Peters came to the conclusion that the field came into being because of a change in how it was seen. Changes can be made to the objectives, procedures, and outcomes of linguistic research in the relationships between linguists and those whose languages they research; he also concluded that for improvements to be made, challenges

addressed within (1) the quality and quantity of the documentary record, (2) interdisciplinarity and cross-discipline collaboration; (3) meta-documentation; and (4) recruitment, training, and sustainability; would have to be addressed.

My conclusion of the article is that I believe Peter did an excellent job of introducing the concepts of language documentation; addressing why it is growing more and more important in the studies of linguistics, as well as the problems that the field is currently facing. As Peter concluded, I also think there are issues within data collection and implementation that need to be corrected or, at the very least, begin to form some standardised. Personally, I do not know if we will be able to stop the estimated extinction of the large population of languages; as other languages grow in popularity due to trade, tourism etc, more minor and less economic languages will begin to fade. Stating that, I feel we are on the path to preserving the written format of the language, fortunately, meaning that even if it is no longer spoken, it can be relearned, and there are records of the sounds and structures.

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