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Why Language Documentation Matters

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ISSN 2197-0009 ISSN 2197-0017 (electronic)
SpringerBriefs in Linguistics
ISBN 978-3-030-66189-2 ISBN 978-3-030-66190-8 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66190-8

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Abstract The eight chapters of this book provide an overview of practical, humanistic, and scientific applications of Documentary Linguistics, a subfield of linguistics that aims to create a lasting and accessible record of under-resourced languages. Through case studies, we see how language users seek healing from historical trauma through engagement with community linguistic and cultural materials. We review examples from low-resourced languages that shed light on new aspects of human cognition and creativity. We consider how linguistic diversity continues to be weakened through natural disasters, genocide, disease, resettlement, political instability, and language policies, and how language users and linguists engage in language revitalization, documentation, and description to intervene and strengthen languages. Finally, we consider professional and personal motivations for engaging in these activities and the impact of language documentation on society, the discipline, and the individual.

Keywords Language documentation · Documentary linguistics · UN year of indigenous languages · Documenting endangered languages · Descriptive linguistics · Language revitalization · Language reclamation

An all too common scenario: Jenny belongs to an Indigenous community of 3,000 people spread over 20 villages. An earthquake makes the region uninhabitable, forcing families to move from the villages to adjacent larger cities. Jenny slowly forgets much about village life, including how to use her language for day-to-day communication. A second all too common scenario: Sumit grew up in a posh New Delhi neighborhood. As a young boy, Sumit spoke Bengali at home, but with his friends he spoke English and Hindi. Now 40 years later, a professor at a university in New Zealand, he can no longer speak Bengali with ease. He's forgotten many of the words and is embarrassed to speak because his lack of fluency is obvious. These two scenarios, Jenny's and Sumit's, are radically different due to the simple fact that while Sumit can reengage with Bengali in literally hundreds of ways (films, books, the internet, communities of speakers), there is no way for Jenny to engage with her heritage language. Why? Unlike Bengali, which has many resources, Jenny's

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S. L. Chelliah, *Why Language Documentation Matters*,
SpringerBriefs in Linguistics,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66190-8_1