

CHAPTER 17

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LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION IN DIASPORA COMMUNITIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

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FIELDWORK with immigrant communities in urban centers has played an important historical role in linguistics despite scarce mention of this practice in the growing literature on language description and fieldwork. Bowerman and Warner (2015, 63), in a rare exception, explicitly identify diaspora fieldwork as a distinct scenario among seven different possible relations between linguists and a language community:

Linguist works with a diaspora community. The language is spoken in an area of conflict or severe poverty where direct fieldwork would be irresponsible or impossible. The linguist works with members of a diaspora or refugee community in a local town, with work conducted at the university and a local community center. The linguist works mostly on theoretical work for articles or a dissertation, but provides advice to community members about educational materials for the language, and also college preparation advice for community children seeking to further their education.

While this accurately describes common activities of individual researchers in diaspora settings, we discuss here ways in which the range of activities can be expanded through a formal organization.¹ We focus on concrete examples of collaborative work and what we believe to be the future potential of urban fieldwork, drawing in particular on the experiences of the Endangered Language Alliance, a non-profit organization

¹ We use this term because we would like to include here organizations such as the Multilingual Manchester project and the (now defunct) Jakarta Field Station of the Max Planck Institute, which, while not narrowly focused on endangered languages, overlap to an extent in scope and potential.

based in New York City with which both authors are affiliated.² We examine this topic first from the perspective of descriptive and documentary linguistics and finally assess the prospects for language maintenance and revitalization in diaspora. While work in diaspora communities can by no means replace traditional fieldwork, we argue that it has significant advantages of its own in terms of access, visibility, and particular kinds of collaborations that may only be possible in an urban center.

2. URBANIZATION AND THE RISE OF HYPERDIVERSE CITIES

The traditional notion of “fieldwork” bifurcates the world into a natural environment, i.e., the rural areas in which fieldwork is typically carried out, and various types of ostensibly less natural environments, i.e., the labs, offices, libraries, and other centers where academic work is carried out. Traveling to “the field” has been the dominant paradigm in descriptive linguistics for well over a century and previous to these modern fieldwork-based studies, missionary linguists from Europe and the Americas had already been involved in a type of long-term fieldwork for centuries (see Chelliah and De Reuse 2011, chap. 3, for a good overview). The bifurcation between field and academic center in many ways continues the divide between colony and *metropole* and suffers from some of the same imbalances, especially with regard to the research agenda, the background of the researchers, and attribution of credit. While such imbalances seem destined to remain as long as the economic and social conditions that underlie them exist, the divide is now becoming less stark in both directions. On one hand, greater sensitivity to the traditional fieldwork power dynamic has resulted in efforts to bring training in language documentation and linguistics to indigenous peoples and developing countries (Jukes 2011). On the other hand, linguists are now able to do much more of their analysis and writing in the field, due to advances in computing power, storage, and portability, which have rendered the academic center, as a physical entity, far less central. Creating a “field station” for linguistic research anywhere in the world is also far more feasible now and this too offers more research opportunities to populations that have thus far only been the subject of research. A staffed, bricks-and-mortar center can enable a local community to take a more active role independent of any individual researcher(s), with a place to work, access to equipment, an opportunity for training, and a chance to get paid. Both technology and technology transfer, combined with new

² For reasons of space, we must leave to future work a detailed discussion of the ethical issues specific to fieldwork in diaspora settings. Overall, the issues which have been discussed for traditional fieldwork collaborations (e.g., Rice 2011, 2012) apply to diaspora work but, as would be expected, many of the inter- and intra-community tensions commonly found on the village level do not exist on the same scale in urban diaspora communities. Nonetheless, certain other issues, such as those relating to immigration or refugee status, are uniquely relevant to diaspora contexts.

ideologies of collaborative fieldwork, empowerment, and community engagement or even control,³ have thus blurred the line somewhat between the historical antecedent of field and metropole.⁴

It is crucial both for reasons of social justice and scientific progress that linguists strengthen efforts to train community members in the documentation of their own languages. But in the attempt to redress the imbalances of the traditional research model, a significant set of collaborative opportunities has gone largely ignored. Living in any major metropolitan center in the world today, linguists are already in some sense in “the field.” Many of the same communities that linguists travel to from academic centers are already represented in centers of immigration. As of the last two decades, most metropolitan areas are home to a considerable number of threatened languages, many of which are underdescribed and even some which are undocumented.

The trend toward urbanization is only increasing over time. According to UN statistics, more than half of the world’s population now live in urban areas, up from just 30% in 1950 and set to increase to a full two-thirds of humanity by 2050. While the world’s rural population has stopped expanding, urban centers will add 1.5 billion residents over the next fifteen years and 3 billion by 2050.⁵ The large-scale population movements have created cities of unparalleled diversity, but the factors behind this demographic shift are precisely those that give rise to ever-increasing rates of language death and endangerment. In particular, environmental, political, and social forces conspire to make traditional rural livelihoods untenable. In many cases, there have been clear political culprits. Henderson (2015, 241), discussing civil and interstate conflict in some of the most multilingual parts of Africa, argues that “language loss due to displacement has been grossly underestimated.” In another very different case, the North American Free Trade Agreement radically lowered income for already impoverished farmers in Mexico, including the most linguistically diverse states of Oaxaca and Guerrero.⁶ In the same region, the modernization of farming practices, imposed upon traditional farmers during the “green revolution” beginning in the mid-twentieth century, has created large agricultural dead zones (Sonnenfeld 1992). More generally, deforestation, industrial pollution, and land grabs throughout the world have robbed indigenous people of their self-sufficiency. Compounding the depletion of resources is an ever-increasing need for cash to cover the costs of mandatory education and other expenses of modern citizenship. The difficulty of continuing traditional lifeways in the home territory has led to the forcible integration of these communities into the cash economy, leading in turn to the skyrocketing rates of urbanization cited above.

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³ See Czaykowska-Higgins (2009), Dwyer (2006), and Wilkins (1992) for discussion.

⁴ This is in addition to other changes. See Grenoble (2010) for a summary.

⁵ See <http://www.unfpa.org/urbanization#sthash.HD9AQ4Lr.dpuf>.

⁶ See <https://www.thenation.com/article/retreat-subsistence/>. “By some estimates, dispossessed farmers account for almost half of the 500,000 or so Mexicans who, until the recent recession, immigrated illegally to the United States each year. González told me of whole villages where only the elderly remain.”

The linguistic and cultural gain of the metropolis has thus come at a great loss to indigenous communities all over the world. While diaspora communities can help keep their home communities afloat economically through remittances, the continual draining of fluent speakers and participants in cultural activities cannot be so easily remediated. Moreover, the draining of fluent speakers is just one way in which linguistic communities are negatively affected by migration. Perez-Baez (2009) investigates a transnational Zapotec community of Oaxaca with possibly up to half of its population in Los Angeles and concludes that even in cases where large-scale emigration does not deplete the pool of fluent speakers, returning immigrants can introduce the politically dominant language into domains that previously belonged exclusively to the local language. In such cases, it is precisely because of the strong connections between an *in situ* indigenous community and its counterpart diaspora community that language shift is accelerating.

While the conditions are clearly complex, we may be able to speak of a “language drain” on par with the mass outmigration of skilled labor referred to as “brain drain.” We would also like to know whether there exists a countervailing effect, on par with what has been termed “brain gain” (Kapur 2010), a net benefit in terms of “human capital” that arguably accrues to countries that export skilled workers when they eventually send home not just monetary remittances but also cultural, business, and technical know-how. As discussed further below, one goal which urban language organizations appear well positioned to achieve is the collaborative creation of digital language material “for export” to audiences back home. Inasmuch as this can be further developed, urbanization and emigration need not be a completely negative experience for small language communities.

It is especially noteworthy that urbanization and emigration have hit some of the world’s most linguistically dense and delicate areas the hardest. A case in point, mentioned above, are the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca in Mexico, home to a set of highly diverse languages belonging to the Otomanguan, Mayan, Uto-Aztecan, Mixe-Zoquean, and Tequistlatecan families, in addition to Huave, a language isolate. Some local varieties of these languages now have more speakers in the diaspora than in their traditional territories due to the pressures discussed above. In this case, at least, a recognized “language hotspot” (Anderson 2011) now seems to be on the move.

3. RE-CONCEIVING LINGUISTICS AND THE CITY

There are a number of reasons why urban immigrant populations have largely been ignored by linguists. Most importantly, linguists set out to document a language in the broadest range of contexts possible (Himmelman 1998 *inter alia*); in the diaspora, these contexts are often radically narrowed. For instance, immigrant communities may

lack appropriate contexts for ceremonial language use and may have less dialect diversity than in their places of origin. Many traditional activities, including livelihood and subsistence practices, may not be carried out in the diaspora. Furthermore, it is difficult to reconstruct the definitions of technical and taxonomical terms without their referents close at hand.⁷ Clearly, a linguist setting out to describe a language wants to be immersed in that language and culture to whatever extent is possible. Henderson (2015) refers to the “intentionally comical contrast” made by legendary field linguist Terry Crowley between “armchair” and “dirty feet” linguists, and an undesirable “kind of halfway house” between the two types. “Halfway house” linguists, wrote Crowley, “may have travelled no further than the outer suburbs of San Francisco or Manchester. . . . At most, this kind of fieldwork is useful if you are only interested in studying a particular feature of a language without intending to produce a coherent overall account.” (Crowley 2007, 13).

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These serious concerns account for the continued dependency of language documentation and description on traditional fieldwork. But there are also less justifiable reasons for ignoring diaspora communities. First, there is uncertainty as to how to go about locating urban populations, especially communities that are largely living under the radar. Second, there is a tacit distrust in the abilities of speakers living abroad for an extended period of time. Third, there is what Errington (2003) calls “localist rhetoric” in the language endangerment discourse such that indigenous languages are conceived of as inseparable from a traditional territory. As an example, Errington cites Maffi (1999, 40), who refers explicitly to *ex situ* language documentation:

There is a very close parallel between [ex situ] language preservation and ex situ conservation in biology: while both serve an important function, in both cases the ecological context is ignored. Just as seed banks cannot preserve a plant’s biological ecology, ex situ linguistic documentation can not preserve a language’s linguistic ecology.

The more static view is especially difficult to defend in the face of language communities with large diasporas and even more so for languages that have no easily demarcated territory (e.g., Yiddish and Roma). Several languages are also more widely spoken outside their place of origin, e.g., Vlashki, Yiddish, Juhuri, Lo-ke (Mustang). There are furthermore vast human resources in cities that can help advance documentation and revitalization efforts. This includes the presence of linguists and other academics as well as those with knowledge of film, audio, computer science,

⁷ Lahe-Deklin and Si (2014) discuss a successful ethnobiological study done *ex situ* in the Australian National University, countering the perhaps premature assumption made by Kaufman (2009), that environmental knowledge is impossible to collect in any detail, outside the area under study. A lexicon can also develop independently, sometimes very quickly, in a diaspora context. Young Pohnpeians in Hawai’i, for example, are creating new vocabulary items not used by speakers on Pohnpei, who reject these diaspora words (when they learn their origin) for not being “real” Pohnpeian. (Kenneth Rehg, personal communication).

and publishing technology. The opportunities for developing long-term, equitable, working relationships with individual speakers and communities can in fact be better in this environment than in traditional fieldwork scenarios, where social and economic disparities can constitute formidable barriers. Note, however, that collaboration with urban populations, rather than precluding traditional fieldwork, has generally served as a gateway to *in situ* fieldwork. In our experience, urban populations have served as a link to their home communities and have been able to prepare students well for traditional fieldwork. Finally, it is necessary to emphasize the obvious point that diaspora contexts are equally worthy of study in their own terms. Specifically, the ways in which a language is adapted (or not adapted) to new domains differs across communities and can shed light on the role of language ideology and other factors in language maintenance. There are also koine varieties that are emerging or expanding in large cities through dialect mixture (Thomason 2015, 23–24). One such example is Tibetan *ramaluk* (“neither goat nor sheep” speech), which had its beginnings in Nepal and India but which seems to have gained a life of its own in cities like New York and Toronto (Ghoso 2007). More generally, while multilingualism and language maintenance in urban settings have been studied extensively for larger languages (see Garcia and Fishman 2002 for a New York example), very little information exists for smaller language communities.

Taken together, we believe these points make a persuasive argument for the creation of urban centers for language documentation, description, and even revitalization, too. Note that linguists have been working intensively with speakers in *ex situ* contexts since the beginning of modern descriptive linguistics. Bloomfield’s monumental Tagalog grammar and text collection (Bloomfield 1917) was written not in the Philippines but in Illinois through the help of a single speaker of the language, Alfredo Viola Santiago. What is still lacking, however, is a more systematic and long-term approach that involves building networks, not only with individuals but with community institutions.

In the following, we discuss our experiences in this regard over the last several years at the Endangered Language Alliance (ELA) in New York and Toronto.

4. THE EXPERIENCES OF AN URBAN LANGUAGE ORGANIZATION

4.1. History

The Endangered Language Alliance was founded in 2010 as a non-profit organization with a mission to promote language documentation through collaboration with local immigrant communities and to educate the public about the causes and consequences of language death. At its inception, the organization’s modest goal was to bring together linguistics students with speakers of endangered languages for long term collaborations

(Kaufman 2009).⁸ As the network expanded through prominent articles in the press (Roberts 2010 *inter alia*), the activities expanded accordingly to include mapping language communities, initiating student-led documentation projects, and hosting classes in several indigenous and threatened languages, beginning with Nahuatl and ultimately extending to Breton, K'iche', Kichwa, Quechua, and Hawaiian.

An important initial activity consisted of basic language surveys on the street with the aim of better understanding the range of minority languages present within well-recognized West African, Mexican, Nepali, and other communities across the city with high linguistic diversity. The US census is virtually silent on languages without national status because of problems inherent in the survey methods. It is impossible to offer a comprehensive list of languages in the paper census form but, more importantly, local languages are often deemed by their speakers to be irrelevant to the purposes of the census. Our surveys involved canvassing with a clipboard as well as distributing fliers with a telephone number to an answering service. The fliers offered short-term work for those who spoke relevant languages and were interested in participating. (The notion of “relevant language” was usually expressed on recruitment materials using either one or both of the terms *indigenous* and *endangered*.) The answering services were set up in four major lingua francas (English, Spanish, French, and Russian).

This turned out to be an effective method, which led to several long-term collaborations. Weekly meetings with participants involved traditional descriptive activities with a documentary focus on recording narratives, stories, and other oral texts of value. In many cases, these encounters created the only high-quality online media for language communities that lack technological resources. Recorded narratives and dialogues have been disseminated largely through the organization's YouTube channel, as it accommodates time-aligned transcripts and is the most popular means of reaching a wide audience, with the ultimate goal of having all material properly archived in addition to being available on popular platforms.⁹ At the same time, survey activities brought volunteers and students in touch with many neglected and marginalized populations of the city and thus heightened their awareness not only of the linguistic diversity that we sought to document but also of the exceedingly difficult social conditions in which this diversity exists.

One of the more interesting impacts of the revolution in digital and social media is the elevation of primary sources, which allows for the curation of original data but emphasizes maintaining transparent access to the original voices. Language attitudes surveys, for instance, were not only conducted by linguists but interpreted by them as

⁸ One inspiration for the model was the student-led *Language Documentation Training Center* at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where students belonging to various departments were trained to make short descriptions of their own languages together with sample recordings.

⁹ Holton (2011) and Moriarty (2011) discuss some of the new domains for endangered languages introduced by recent technology. However, the role of video sharing, while lying at the heart of the Endangered Language Project (www.endangeredlanguages.com), has yet to be subject to systematic investigation, as far as we are aware.

well, and there was typically little access to the original interviews. One of our new tasks is to create platforms on which communities affected by language loss can speak out and be heard. A large portion of ELA's work since its inception has been to facilitate the making of these videos, including their transcription, translation, publication, and circulation.

At present, the organization has become a hub for any type of activity around endangered languages and language documentation in New York City. The various elements, activities, and relations of the organization are detailed below with the hope that similar initiatives can benefit from the model in other cities around the world.

4.2. An ecosystem for urban language organizations

An urban organization focused on language documentation can bring together a variety of constituencies and actors invested in and concerned about linguistic diversity. Figure 17.1 below illustrates the various constituencies that make up this ecosystem and the kinds of collaboration that have taken place. We discuss each in turn.



FIGURE 17.1. An ecosystem for urban language organizations

4.2.1. *Threatened linguistic communities*

The constituency which the organization seeks to serve first and foremost is made up of the relevant language communities. In our experience, most community organizations with a threatened heritage language are interested in documentation and revitalization initiatives but do not have the resources to take action alone on this front. Few of our collaborators who have made powerful statements about language preservation would have done so without facilitation from a third party. These are people who do not consider themselves activists but whose experiences and opinions regarding language endangerment and conservation are compelling. In some cases, they feel (or come to feel) a strong ideological motivation to work with linguists on further documenting their language; in other cases, it is simply something they enjoy doing from time to time. Working with such organizations is ideal, as it widens the scope of both the input and the impact, even for a short-term project. In most cases, however, languages are represented by scattered individuals without a community organization. Making contact with such individuals can be facilitated by organizations that help settle refugees. In the case of New York City, sizable refugee populations have arrived from the Middle East, Sudan, and Myanmar, among other areas over the last decade. While working with newly arrived refugees may prove particularly challenging, it can provide them with a small source of income (provided there is funding) and a valuable cultural exchange. Among refugee groups, Sudanese minorities and their languages are in a particularly precarious situation due to the protracted conflict in South Sudan, the Nuba hills, and Darfur. Sudanese languages are also especially diverse, endangered, and lacking in documentation. Other linguistic initiatives with Sudanese refugees that we are aware of include one initiated by researchers at the University of Melbourne (Musgrave and Hajek 2015) and the Moro Language Project based at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD).¹⁰ Smaller cities now taking on disproportionately large numbers of refugees—such as Boise, Idaho; Charlottesville, Virginia; or Utica, New York—may be in just as good a position as large cities when it comes to direct work with refugees.

There is tremendous variation in terms of how formally or cohesively diaspora communities do or do not organize themselves. Religious institutions often form on an at least partially ethnolinguistic basis. Italian social clubs and Chinese benevolent associations based on specific localities are widespread, and Himalayan groups tend to have one organization per ethnolinguistic grouping, but indigenous Mexicans tend not to be organized by ethnolinguistic group, at least in New York City, although there may be loose village associations. On the other hand, smaller cities in the United States have attracted disproportionately large numbers of immigrants from particular Mexican language groups, based on a chain migration pattern. One such example can be found in Albany, New York, roughly a three-hour drive from New York City, which hosts a large population of Triqui speakers from the Mexican state of Oaxaca.¹¹

¹⁰ <http://moro.ucsd.edu/>.

¹¹ Working with this community, linguist George Aaron Broadwell has led the production of a dictionary (Albany Working Group, ongoing) as well as other publications (Broadwell et al. 2009;

In some cases, a community-wide language documentation project can also be effectively led by a sufficiently motivated individual. An ELA project entitled *Voices of the Himalayas* focuses on documenting Tibeto-Burman (especially Tibetic) language varieties as spoken in New York City. On the initiative of Nawang Tsering Gurung, originally from Mustang, Nepal but now living in the Himalayan community in Queens, the project members have been recording oral histories in the style of short, popular online documentaries, including contextual footage taken in neighborhoods, homes, and community centers. Though Nawang is the founder of a community-focused non-profit and has worked for a Tibetan social service organization, it is really his personal role as a connector that has enabled interviews and ensured the popularity of the resulting videos. As in traditional fieldwork situations, network effects and community entry points are crucial, with one contact leading to another. In cities it also seems more likely for such connections to happen across languages because of the formation of “super-communities” like Himalayan Queens (or post-Soviet, “Russian-speaking” Brooklyn).¹²

Another collaborative activity with which ELA has experimented is internet radio. A space inside the office has been converted into a small studio for broadcasting in indigenous languages of the Americas, including Garifuna, Totonac, K’iche’, and others as well as discussion of indigenous issues through the medium of Spanish. These broadcasts connect the homeland and the diaspora, representing marginalized language groups with low-cost, high-quality media. The benefits of recording this type of material for documentation purposes is evident. Through facilitating internet radio, an urban language organization can help strengthen bonds between both the diaspora and homeland communities while collecting valuable conversational recordings.

The urban language organization model may work best with languages that have sizable communities of speakers in diaspora. If a critical mass of speakers is required for keeping a language vital in its homeland, this is even more the case in diaspora. Generally, however, the language communities ELA is involved with contain tens of thousands of speakers but are losing the battle of intergenerational transmission. In terms of our own prioritization, a linguistic minority voicing collective alarm regarding language shift holds just as much weight as vitality statistics reported by the standard sources. In many cases, statistics that could appear authoritative are in fact outdated estimates. In other cases, the standards of evaluation are applied unevenly.

4.2.2. *Academic departments*

An independent language organization can fruitfully complement the work of local linguistics departments. Though there are a few academic centers with a specialization in language documentation, in some cases researchers are interested individuals who find their “community of practice” at periodic conferences and workshops, rather than in the

Vidal-Lopez 2012). See the papers in Fox and Rivera-Salgado (2004) for more examples of indigenous Mexican communities that have been transplanted to other parts of the United States.

¹² The downside of this, from the point of view of language loss, is that cities like New York are sites of assimilation not just to English but to languages like Nepali, Tibetan, Russian, Spanish, and others.

city where they live. ELA has been able to serve as an open-door hub for language documentation and description work that can continue outside school terms and specific classes.

The organizing of field methods classes has been a particularly successful example of complementarity. Larger linguistics departments have a perennial need for native speakers of lesser-known languages to serve as consultants, so that students can get an initial sense of the “field” in the controlled environment of the classroom. Over the last six years, ELA has attempted to bridge the gap between field methods classes and local language communities in two ways: (i) by connecting speakers of endangered and under-documented languages with field methods classes in surrounding universities (CUNY, NYU, and Columbia), and (ii), by providing space, knowledge, and funding for the documentation work started in field methods classes to continue and for the results to be disseminated publicly. In best-case scenarios, a field methods class, instead of being a self-contained, solely student-focused experience, can jump-start a longer-term project and set of relationships. As is well known, the attempt to combine the goals of education and documentation is not without potential pitfalls. Student goals (e.g., to work out basic aspects of the language that are already well known) may conflict with documentation goals, making unreasonable demands on speakers and communities eager for more professional help. Ensuring continuity and coordination between documentation work done in the class, at the organization, and in the traditional “field” can also be a significant challenge.

More broadly, a language organization can provide a kind of “second home” for undergraduate and graduate linguistics students (among others) with a particularly strong interest in documentation, revitalization, and community work. At ELA, such students have formed the bedrock of our volunteer corps for the last six years; for some who have not been able to enroll in a field methods class at their home institution for whatever reason, ELA has provided a kind of equivalent. For areal and language family specialists, too, ELA has served as a space for collaborating with other researchers, finding speakers and volunteers, and sharing work.

4.2.3. *Municipal departments*

As a result of the limitations of the census, municipal departments are largely in the dark when it comes to populations that do not speak the official languages of their country. In Manchester, England, the Multilingual Manchester project led by Yaron Matras has worked to map out which languages are spoken in the city and has conducted various types of surveys on the diversity and vitality of these languages within the city.¹³ With the most accurate information on the linguistic needs of Manchester’s residents, the project has become instrumental to the city’s efforts at providing multilingual services.

¹³ The varied activities of Multilingual Manchester are documented in excellent detail on: <http://mlm.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/>.

The project has also taken up a positive role as an institutional advocate for promoting multilingualism, heritage language maintenance, and expanded language services.

Likewise in New York, ELA has become a de facto provider of interpreters for Indigenous languages of Mexico and Guatemala to the local courts. One civil servant, in charge of finding interpreters for the Queens courts, stated that demand for interpreters of less common languages is rising sharply and encouraged ELA to formalize its role as a language translation agency in making referrals and connections. Municipal departments are either required, or prefer, to deal with institutions rather than individuals, both for references and sometimes for procedures like payment.

The difficult translation and orthography issues that open up beyond standardized, written, amply documented languages are largely invisible to city agencies. For example, a Department of Education specialist looking to reach Mixteco parents in East Harlem was astonished to learn that there are dozens of distinctive, mutually unintelligible Mixteco varieties, most of whose local speakers have never seen their language written, and thus one cannot straightforwardly plan to translate a document “into Mixteco.” In another instance, Department of Health specialists, themselves Mexican-American, requested that ELA personnel come to the department to present a briefing on indigenous Mexican languages, they had realized that Spanish materials were inadequate for communicating with one of the city’s most marginalized populations.¹⁴

The “long tail” of less common languages is invisible to citizens, policymakers, and those involved in delivering services. As city officials become increasingly aware of and hopefully sensitized to the depth of the new linguistic diversity, they are likely to turn to urban language organizations, where they exist, for answers.¹⁵

4.2.4. *Filmmakers and film students*

The rise of the field of language documentation in the last two decades has increasingly privileged the use of video. Several factors are at play in the increasing salience of video, including but not limited to community desires for richer, engaging media with visuals; the greater shareability of video online and via mobile phone; and the increasing importance accorded to the study of gesture and context.

The demands in creating high-quality language documentation are more than a single individual can live up to. Linguistic recordings aimed at the public or at a language community, as opposed to just specialists, are in competition with a glut of free, highly engaging video content on popular platforms. While linguists and communities cannot compete with Hollywood in terms of production value, we must recognize and adapt to higher production standards where possible, or risk being drowned out. In addition to linguistic analysis, we must also be proficient in the technical aspects of audio recording, video recording, editing, not to mention interviewing, database creation, and other

¹⁴ See <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/11/nyregion/immigrants-who-speak-indigenous-mexican-languages-encounter-isolation.html>.

¹⁵ Besides the courts, the Department of Education, and the Department of Health, ELA has collaborated with the Queens Public Library system and the Queens Museum.

skills. Regardless of how much time a linguist puts into video production, specialists will be able to produce better film.

ELA has thus made a point of collaborating with filmmakers, videographers, and film students wherever possible. These collaborations have yielded short, simple videos of higher quality as well as a full feature documentary (*Language Matters*, which aired on public television). The basic arrangement, which should be formalized, is usually that ELA can use and archive the raw footage while the filmmaker or film student, as desired, creates his or her own project. The approach is not without its challenges. In one representative case, a team of filmmakers, understandably focused on the visual and technical aspects of a shoot, repeatedly interrupted speakers. In other cases, the filmmakers and film students have not ultimately felt comfortable sharing all their footage, nor have they been professional about doing it; their involvement was contingent and superficial. As for working with experienced professionals, the top-down, visual-focused, multi-take method of filmmaking, centered on paid professional actors, is problematic for the purposes of language documentation. Likewise, linguists have to find a happy medium between working with sophisticated, quality equipment and not intimidating speakers with lights, cameras, and microphones.

4.2.5. *Educational outreach*

Where a university-based linguistics program might be assumed (rightly or wrongly) to be a self-contained academic unit built for interfacing with other such units, a language non-profit—located in a city, with an online presence—is almost by default assumed to be public-facing and practice-oriented. ELA is thus regularly contacted by educators, curators, and others interested in having an educational program around endangered languages or the languages of New York City. Despite the almost complete lack of linguistics education at the primary or secondary level, frequently lamented, ELA's experience suggests that there is real interest from educators if they see a local organization doing language work that is at least partially intended for a non-specialist audience. Responding to these requests, ELA has made presentations at local middle schools, high schools, and colleges; created language record-a-thons at fairs; and launched a few experimental “language tours” of city neighborhoods. More traditional public events are also a mainstay: readings, performances, and lectures aimed at a general audience. As mentioned earlier, ELA also regularly hosts community language classes in less commonly taught languages (most recently Quechua and Hawaiian), typically attracting a mix of semi-speakers, heritage speakers, and members of the general public.

Another form of education, particularly for those with a deeper interest in language or a plan to study linguistics, can come through volunteering, another prerogative of a non-profit that a university is not typically in a position to support. The degree of volunteer interest in ELA has been consistently strong and occasionally volunteers are themselves younger members of endangered-language speech communities. This presents the opportunity to include younger speakers or semi-speakers in the documentation process. One such case was that of a speaker of Juhuri, an Iranian language of Azerbaijan now spoken mostly in New York and Israel by a small Jewish minority

(Authier 2012; Borjian and Kaufman 2015). While the volunteer was beginning her undergraduate degree in linguistics at a local university, she had no means to connect her studies with her heritage language. At ELA, she was able to offer invaluable assistance in the translation and analysis of an older speaker's recordings that we had made previously in her own community in Brooklyn. The translation process furthermore required her to engage her parents in Juhuri to fill the gaps and thus facilitated an intergenerational connection around meaningful language work. It is worth emphasizing the great utility of any such collaboration in which new documentation can be created while simultaneously improving a young person's control of the language. This can be seen, in embryo, as a digital, asynchronous version of the master-apprentice approach to revitalization (Hinton 1997). Unlike in the actual master-apprentice approach, the "digital apprentice" cannot start from scratch; the method is best suited for younger speakers or semi-speakers who want to improve their language skills via a thorough analysis of the speech of a more fluent speaker.

Though difficult to implement on a wider scale, this kind of participation can have an impact on individuals and how they see their language. Effectively harnessing (without exploiting) the skills of volunteers, while also teaching them new skills, is not an easy task. Regardless, volunteers form an important part of the loose "extended family" at ELA, an organizational shape shared by other small, grassroots-oriented non-profits.

Performances have constituted another type of educational outreach with positive side effects. Between 2013 and 2015, ELA produced an eight-part series of performances and presentations with each installment focused on the endangered languages of a different region or language family. The speakers, depending on their interests and talents, read stories, sang songs, performed poems, or told riddles. Besides offering a unique introduction to languages and cultures that receive no public attention, the performances in many cases also had a considerable impact on the speakers themselves. A similar initiative entitled *Treasure Language Storytelling* is currently being developed by Steven Bird and colleagues, who are creating a manual for such public programs.

4.2.6. *Artists, photographers, illustrators*

A city is a dense concentrate of creative talent, allowing for a variety of approaches to an issue like language endangerment, which has attracted artists, composers, and writers to an unusual degree.¹⁶ Like journalists and filmmakers, they are seeking compelling material for their own creative and professional purposes, but done right this can enable new creative approaches to revitalization and publicizing language endangerment. Diaspora communities are points of intersection between "traditional" cultures of artistry and craftsmanship and the relatively more mass-market, globalized, and professionalized "culture industry." The goal should be to make such intersections mutually beneficial and symbiotic, and not simply extractive and appropriative. In one good example of

¹⁶ For example, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/03/arts/music/vanishing-languages-reincarnated-as-music.html>.

artistic collaboration, ELA came to work with photographer Yuri Marder, who created portraits of our collaborators supplemented by our descriptions and recordings. With the support of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the work was exhibited in different forms at multiple locations and was able to introduce some of New York City's endangered languages to a wider audience through a personal medium—individual speakers and their stories.

An exhibit at the Queens Museum featured the results of an ELA collaboration with several artists and authors. The initial impetus was the preparation of a language map of Queens, informed by ELA's research, for an unusual atlas of New York City (Solnit and Jelly-Shapiro 2016). The map was in turn adapted by the artist Mariam Ghani for the creation of a large-scale mural in the main hall of the museum. In another case, ELA helped facilitate a musical collaboration between Breton and Garifuna musicians, including a concert and finally a CD. A willingness to collaborate on projects far outside the regular domain of linguistics has not only broadened our approach to language revitalization but has also created new and interesting material in the languages we aim to support.

4.2.7. *Journalists*

Cities, hyperdiverse “global cities” in particular, are media-saturated environments with dedicated corps of specialists devoted to crafting narratives, seeking out experts and circulating information. An urban language organization can become a “go-to” resource for journalists researching stories on language endangerment generally, on specific language communities and on the city itself and its linguistic landscapes. ELA receives an extraordinarily high volume of such requests from print, radio, and broadcast outlets of all kinds and responds as workloads allow to give more exposure to issues of language endangerment, linguistic diversity, and multilingualism. Perhaps the biggest and most unexpected boon is that speakers of other endangered and little-documented languages often get in touch after seeing media coverage, leading in turn to new partnerships.

Journalistic attention is not without its downsides, however. ELA's six-year experience suggests that reporters may repeatedly ask the same questions and employ frames that linguists and speech communities may find objectionable. Furthermore, journalists are often looking for a single, named central character for their story—an imagined *Indiana Jones*-style linguist, seen “saving languages”—and are unlikely to be willing to give adequate attention either to linguistic material or to the story of a whole community. While members of a big-city diaspora community are more likely to be familiar with journalistic practice, sensitive issues frequently come up and many journalists are unable or unwilling, following journalism ethics, to share pre-publication drafts for fact checking.

ELA's experience suggests that the existence of a visible, responsive organization, especially in a high-profile media environment like New York City, can increase coverage of linguistic issues and of endangered-language issues in particular. Journalists are looking not just for expert testimony but for entry points into stories (introductions, tips, events, facilitated situations, etc.) which their reporting depends on. Given how labor-intensive this process can be, researchers must manage these requests judiciously. Making an extra effort around high-impact stories in major outlets is common sense,

but special consideration should also be given to “ethnic media” that may have relevant speech community members among their readers.¹⁷ Advertising in such media may also be an effective way to reach endangered-language communities in the city, although we have not invested in this approach.

5. GREENHOUSE OR GRAVEYARD?

Given the pace of language loss, there is reason to believe that peak urban linguistic diversity is occurring now. As intergenerational transmission weakens in small language communities around the world, newer immigrants will be less likely to speak an indigenous or minority language. Moreover, the rising cost of living in larger cities and an apparently growing prejudice against immigration seem likely to dim the prospects for urban linguistic diversity in places like New York and London, to take just two examples. In New York, the proportion of foreign-born residents (within the fast-growing total population) has remained stable at around 40% for the last fifteen years, after rising from around 20% in 1970, but the overall share of immigrants to America residing in New York City fell from 9% in 2000 to 7% in 2014. There is evidence that new arrivals are not staying as long in the city, but moving more quickly to cheaper areas, including suburbs.¹⁸

Peak urban diversity in New York City may be occurring now, but it may just be getting going in the emerging megacities of the developing world, which are closer to “hotspots” of language endangerment (Anderson 2011), and in the smaller, cheaper cities where large-scale immigration is just beginning. It is also possible that growing awareness of and interest in linguistic diversity will enable a more multilingual future for the long term, reversing a history of urban areas being “graveyards” for languages and turning them into “greenhouses.”

While cities may be highly effective places for the kinds of language initiatives outlined above, language maintenance in diaspora beyond two generations is rare without a continual influx of new speakers from the homeland. Likewise, the signal cases of language revitalization, such as Hebrew, Hawaiian, Welsh, Wampanoag, have all to varying extents taken place on the terrain of a “homeland,” bound up with questions of sovereignty and autonomy. Such is the power of English and the pull of assimilation that cases of multi-generation language maintenance in the United States have generally been restricted to highly insular religious communities—whether the Amish in

¹⁷ See the useful website www.voicesofny.org for an English-language overview of New York’s massive and vitally important “ethnic media” world. Media is a language domain that in some cases flourishes more in diaspora—the first-ever Irish-language periodical was published in Brooklyn (*An Gaodhal*), while the center of Yiddish-language journalism has been in New York for over a century.

¹⁸ Adam Forman, Center for an Urban Future, personal communication, 2016. See also https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/immigration/NYC_Immigration_Rpt_8-2014.pdf.

rural Pennsylvania or, more recently, Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn. Other “settler societies” composed primarily of immigrants (such as Canada or Australia) show a broadly similar pattern, and increasingly so do all contemporary nation-states, given their focus on national identity and language uniformity. Many of the ethnolinguistic groups now experiencing diaspora and global-scale migration are doing so for the first time. Arguably, self-conscious diaspora was a condition previously confined to a relatively small number of groups, which is now becoming nearly universal.¹⁹

Complicating the situation is what appears to be the shrinking gap between homelands and diasporas, primarily due to faster, cheaper travel and better communications technologies.²⁰ For some groups, there is now the viable option to send children back to the homeland every summer; for others, even one trip remains formidably difficult. In a number of cases, ELA has been able to connect projects in New York City with fieldwork in the homeland by equipping a collaborator to make recordings during a trip home. The resulting recordings have been among the most important ELA has collected, reflecting the access and perspective of an insider (a member of the language community) paired with the technology and awareness of a diaspora situation.

With resources to pursue this strategy more rigorously, an urban language organization could help counteract “language drain” and anchor the “network of researchers and language speakers actively collaborating online” which Henderson (2015) aptly notes “should be a first step in any documentation endeavor for which the technology is available.” Community members who may have not been particularly motivated or empowered to document their own languages before emigrating can return, even for short trips, with the tools and skills to record valuable material. In addition to being archived, this material can optimally make a round trip through popular digital platforms so that high-quality recordings with translations can be accessed both back home and in the diaspora.

6. CONCLUSION

ELA’s seven-year experience suggests important advantages to having a non-profit language documentation center in an urban diaspora setting. While New York and Toronto are two outstanding examples of cities with extreme linguistic diversity, similar work has also been taking place in different forms in London, Manchester, Barcelona, Jakarta, and elsewhere. We recommend and encourage the establishment of a network of urban

¹⁹ Note the discussion, reported in Rodger Kamenetz’s *The Jew in the Lotus*, of the Tibetan leadership’s interest in studying Jewish cultural and religious survival over the course of a 2,000-year diaspora—today’s massive Tibetan diaspora is less than sixty years old.

²⁰ See the New York Talk Exchange study, an intriguing portrait of diaspora communication (among other things) that shows the city’s different neighborhoods communicate with the rest of the world by phone: <http://senseable.mit.edu/nyte/>.

endangered-language organizations in the world's most hyperdiverse cities, as these cities will only become more important for documenting and maintaining linguistic diversity as the pace of urbanization increases.

We have not touched here on many theoretical aspects of urban fieldwork which deserve attention, for instance, whether or not we can speak of diasporic “language communities” in any type of traditional sense (Patrick 2003; Blommaert and Rampton 2012). In some cases, diaspora, dispersion, and intense language contact can reconfigure and atomize language communities beyond recognition, as is the case with speakers of indigenous Meso-American languages in New York City; in others, a rather traditional-looking “language community” can be substantially reconstituted, as with Hasidic Yiddish. Future work should also continue to explore the linguistic impact of diaspora communities on their places of origin (e.g., Perez-Baez 2009), as well as urban indigenous migrants in areas of high linguistic diversity (e.g., Shulist 2013). Despite recent progress, we still know relatively little about endangered languages in global cities and smaller urban centers. The more we can improve our understanding, the more we will be able to facilitate urban collaborations for the sake of language documentation, maintenance, and revitalization.

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