



Language documentation in an urban context: Three case studies from NYC

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Endangered Language Alliance

- 1 The role of cities
- 2 Activities of Endangered Language Alliance in New York City
- 3 A typology of linguistic scenarios for “immigrant languages”
- 4 A case study on three Iranian languages of NYC

Original motivations

- Thousands of speakers of undescribed and undocumented languages living with us in every major American city.

Why do we know so little about their communities?

- Dozens of linguistics students interested in language documentation and collaborating with native speakers.

Why is there so little networking between linguistics departments and local language communities?

- Leonard Bloomfield had written one of the greatest descriptive grammars and text collections of his time working with an engineering student in Chicago who was a native speaker of Tagalog.

Why wasn't this being done on a larger scale today?

- The Language Documentation Training Center here at UH offered an interesting model that put native speakers at the center.

Later developments

- A surprisingly large number of language activists emerged from the woodwork.
- A hunch confirmed: It is time to start building urban community networks for underdocumented, threatened and indigenous languages.
- Cities are growing at an exponential pace; rural agricultural villages in impoverished countries are emptying out. The need to address languages in diaspora languages will only increase as time passes.

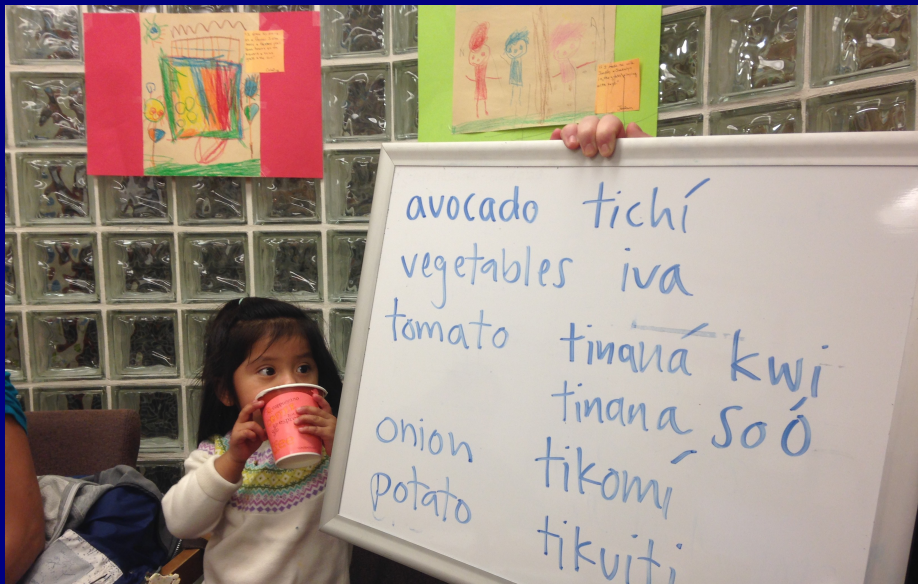
Activities of Endangered Language Alliance in NYC

A quick overview — easier to explain in pictures

The fieldstation



Mother-tongue + English literacy



Facilitating speaker-driven documentation



Indigenous radio



Creating venues for performance



Mai cuman-ange, e wa'ilan Kasuruan, Apo' nimema' in tana'!
Come eat, o mighty god, ancestor who has cultivated the earth!

Creating venues for performance



Awareness building



He said, "Aren't you embarrassed to speak dialect in front of them?"

Pedagogical materials



**Aniha Anansi
Busieti latun duna
Aban lahuyun huya
Dari lun lachibuni
Reideiha huya
Aban labacharagun
Aniha ya Anansi
> Busieti latun duna**

Symposiums



Goals

- The main goal of this talk is to show what kind of scenarios and challenges exist for diaspora languages and...
- how an organization like ELA must be flexible in addressing different needs and opportunities.
- The covert goal is to encourage others to create urban language community networks.

Scenarios

- A very wide a range of social scenarios:
 - Indigenous, undocumented immigrants with no formal education on the bottom of NYC’s socio-economic ladder.
 - Well established refugee communities with high level of education and large numbers of professionals.
 - Individual speakers without a community.
 - Creative writers, story tellers, activists of varied backgrounds.
 - And of course, those with no special interest in their language at all.

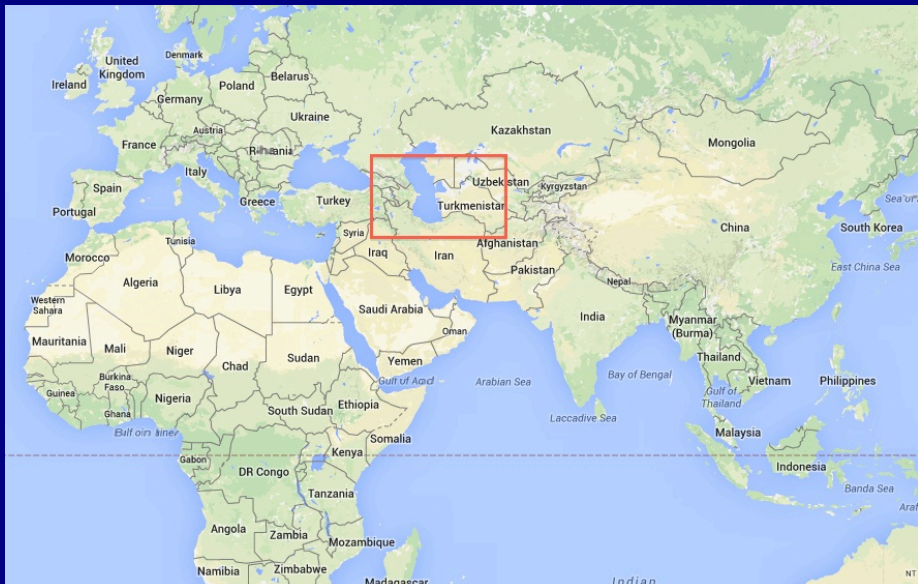
Where do NYC’s threatened languages come from?

- Mexico
- Nepal
- Guatemala
- Sudan
- Central Asia + Caucasus
- Indonesia
- (among many other places)

A case study on three (Judeo-)Iranic languages of NYC

- Bukharian (Uzbekistan)
- Juhuri (Azerbaijan & Dagestan)
- Judeo-Kashani (Iran)

Overview map



Area map



Bukharian community in NYC

- A large community (estimated at 60,000) based in Forest Hills & Rego Park, Queens, NY.
- A long history of commerce going back to the time of the Silk Route.
- In New York, barber shops, shoe repair and the diamond business account for the majority of Bukharian employment.
- Arrived in a wave of immigration from the Soviet Union during the 80's and 90's and changed the demography of certain parts of Queens.
- As Russian speakers and former citizens of the USSR, they had a connection to the more established Jewish communities of NYC. As Bukharians, their deeper cultural connections are with Iran and Afghanistan.

Bukharian language

- Although the language has a large base of speakers at present, it is not being passed on to children in this diaspora.
- Bukharian cannot be considered an endangered *language* because of its dialect relationship to the national languages Tajik, Persian and Dari.
- At the same time, an entire population is undergoing language shift and is being disconnected from their linguistic roots.
 - Reputable sources have considered varieties such as these as endangered languages.
 - Reputable funding agencies have funded documentation projects on such varieties.

Bukharian language

- From a morphological and syntactic perspective, Bukharian has little news to offer.
- A grammatical description may be superfluous.
- But there are clearly aspects like intonation, gesture, use of Hebrew vocabulary and dialect features that could be better documented.

Bukharian community desires

- There is an expressed desire to pass on the language but in reality, Russian dominates in the public sphere.
- There are language classes at the Bukharian synagogue in Forest Hills. (Taught in a Latin orthography, which separates it both from Tajik and historical Bukharian, written in Hebrew and Cyrillic orthographies.)

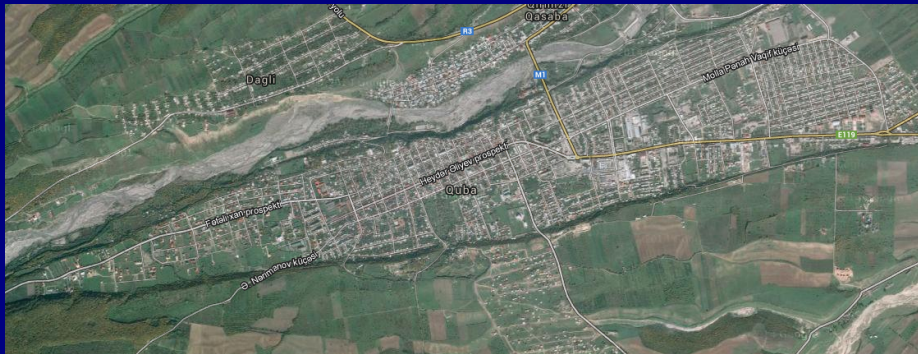
The approach to Bukharian

- There is little we can add to the ongoing pedagogical efforts.
- There is little to add to the academic literature on Bukharian.
- We have not prioritized Bukharian but have documented language attitudes, personal narratives, and songs in the diaspora community of NYC and Toronto.



The Juhuri community

Quba





Juhuri

- Gorsky or Mountain Jews. Smaller community of roughly 20,000 based in Ocean Parkway Brooklyn, mostly from Quba, Azerbaijan and neighboring Dagestan.
- Two Tat languages: Jewish Tat (Juhuri) and Muslim Tat.
- They see their language as “the Jewish language” and refer to Azeri as *Musulmunai* “the Muslim language” (no direct contact w/Muslim Tat).
- Juhuri had a burgeoning literature but lost half of its authors during WWII.

Juhuri in NYC

- Extremely cohesive community but rapidly shifting away from Juhuri.
- A community newspaper is published in NYC but almost entirely in Russian.
- In Israel, the Juhuri “...learned to think about their language as something belonging not only to the past, but to a completely different and even inferior cultural sphere” (Bram 2008:345)
- Yet, there are efforts there to maintain Juhuri as a *theatrical language*

Juhuri theatre in Hadera, Israel



Survey (Borjian & Kaufman forthcoming)

Table 1. Language¹³ proficiency relative to age among the later 1990s immigrants from Azerbaijan

70+	A	J	R	
50–70	A	J	R	(E)
30–50	(A)	J	R	E
20–30		(J)	R	E
Teenagers			(R)	E

Juhuri language

- Some features:
 - The lexicon: layers of Persian (of different eras), Hebrew and Azeri elements.
 - Phonology: pharyngeals, e.g. /ʕov/ ‘water’ vs. /ov/ ‘game (animal)’ with a mysterious origin.
 - Syntactically: Authier (2013:17) notes that Juhuri is grammatically conservative despite showing effects of prolonged contact with neighboring languages.
 - Sociolinguistically: One of the few “Jewish languages” that does not bear a close relation to the language of the surrounding non-Jewish society.

Juhuri vs. Persian

(1) JUHURI

- a. yi ħavur-o-i ma ni
 this friend-PL-EZF 1SG COP.3PL
 ‘These are my friends.’
- b. gufta-ram ki ma iſmu-ra na-ſinox-tan-im
 say-PRF.1SG COMP 1SG 2PL-ACC NEG-know.PRS-INF-1SG
 ‘I said that I didn’t know you.’

(2) PERSIAN

- a. in-ha dust-e man hast-and
 3-PL friend-EZF 1SG COP-3PL
 ‘These are my friends.’
- b. goft-am ke man ſoma:-ra: na-ſena:xt-am
 say-1SG COMP 1SG 2PL-ACC NEG-know.PRS-INF-1SG
 ‘I said that I didn’t know you.’

Hebrew tradition within Juhuri

lexa dudi leqraʔati kalla

‘Let’s go my beloved to meet the bride’

pani fabat neqabaʕa

‘and let us welcome the presence of the Sabbath.’

jamur vazaxur badibrur iħad

‘*observe* and *recall* in a single utterance.’

hiʕmiʕanu il hamajuħad

‘We were made to hear by the unified God.’

aduħnax iħad uʕmuħ iħad

‘God is one and God’s name is one.’

ʕjem ulitiferet valitihila

‘in fame and splendor and praiseful song.’

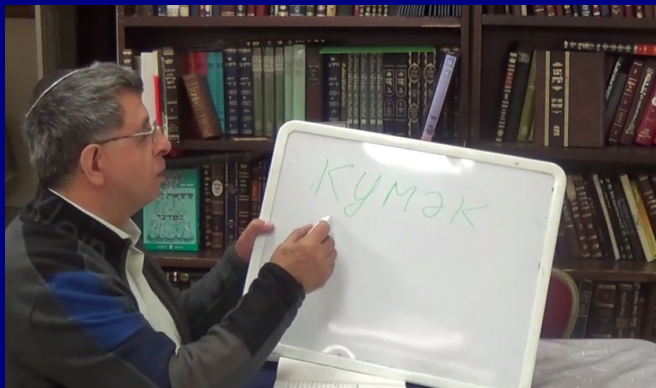
Community desires: language classes

- Top-down approaches
- Short language lessons on the Juhuri TV station.



Community desires: language classes

- Grassroots approaches - community classes taught by Simon Mardakhayev in NYC



The approach to Juhuri

- Accomplishments and goals
 - Published an assessment of Juhuri's vitality in NYC together with a history of the language (Borjian & Kaufman forthcoming).
 - Helped convene a meeting of Juhuri international language activists at Columbia University.
 - Aiming for more comprehensive audio-visual documentation of the NYC community including oral histories.
 - Resources for aiding language transmission.
 - Orthography reform has been the main objective of our collaborator, Yakov Abramov. We are pushing for a focus on audio/visual documentation and creation of new spaces for using Juhuri.

Judeo-Kashani background

- Spoken by a small handful of individuals in Great Neck, Long Island.
- A distinct, severely endangered Iranian language native to the city of Kashan.
- The language was virtually undocumented until recently (Borjian 2012).

Judeo-Kashani community

- While there are thousands of Kashani people living in the United States, very few of them are fluent speakers of Kashani.
- The speakers themselves do not see Kashani as a language of culture.
- Persian is the language of literature, history and culture for this community and Persian is passed on to children in NYC at a seemingly high rate.

Judeo-Kashani vs. Persian

(3) JUDEO-KASHANI

- a. *man = em farsi ne = ʃ = e = zun-a*
 mother=1s.POSS Persian NEG=3s.ERG=DUR=know-PST
 ‘My mother didn’t know Persian.’

(4) PERSIAN

- a. *mādær = æm farsi ne-mi-dan-est*
 mother=1s.POSS Persian NEG=DUR=know-PST
 ‘My mother didn’t know Persian.’

The approach to Judeo-Kashani

- We have not found anyone particularly interested in keeping Kashani alive.
- Documentation is not as easy because speakers are more rememberers than fluent speakers.
- Our main collaborator, Jack Tabari, had to compose his stories on paper before he could read them.



The approach to Judeo-Kashani

- ELA has begun to create a FLEx corpus of stories for an eventual sketch grammar of the language.
- This corpus will be available online so as to be maximally useful to linguists and Iranists.

The approach to Judeo-Kashani

1 •

Mulla Nasruddin •

vâjan • ke • Mollâ • itâ • jeneš • daite • bo • ke • nešežunâ •

vâj • an • ke • Mollâ • itâ • jen • =eš • dar= • it • -e • bo • ke • ne- • š= • e= • zunâ •

vâj • abs:3pl • ke • Mollâ • itâ • jen • =š • dar= • git • -e₂ • bo • ke • ne- • š= • e= • zunâ •

say.PRS • V:ANY • COMP • Mulla • one • woman • =3sg.OBL • PRV= • seize.PST • PFV • be.3sg.PST • COMP • NEG • 3sg.ERG= • DUR= • know.PST •

V • SUBORDCONN • N • CARDNUM • N • PRO • PREVERB • V • V:ANY • COP • SUBORDCONN • V:ANY • V • V • V •

They say that Molla had married (lit. taken) a wife, for whom he couldn't be any good husband. •

2 •

Mulla Nasruddin •

jene • Mollâ • lóbâse • šegâ • , • kowše • šegâ • , • nune • šegâ • , • xórake • šegâ •

jen • =e • Mollâ • lebâs • e= • še= • gâ • kowš • e= • še= • gâ • nun • e= • še= • gâ • xorák • e= • še= •

jen • =e • Mollâ • lebâs • e= • š= • gâ • kowš • e= • š= • gâ • nun • e= • š= • gâ • xorák • e= • š= •

wife • =EZAFA • Mulla • clothing • DUR= • 3sg.ERG= • want • shoe • DUR= • 3sg.ERG= • want • bread • DUR= • 3sg.ERG= • want • food • DUR= • 3sg.ERG= •

N • CASE • N • N • V • V • V • N • V • V • V • V • N • V • V • V • N • V • V •

The Molla's wife wanted clothing, shows, bread, food, and outdoor hobbies. •

4 •

Mulla Nasruddin •

tâ • inke • berâ • jéneš • jándegi • xáyle • saxtâ • tang • gaadá • . •

tâ • in • ke • berâ • jen • =eš • jándegi • xayle • saxt • =â • tang • gaadá •

tâ • in • ke • berâ • jen • =š • jándegi • xayle • saxt • =â • tang • gardâd •

until • this • COMP • for • wife • =3sg.OBL • life • much • hard • =and • tight • become.PST •

CONN • DEM • SUBORDCONN • PREP • N • PRO • N • ADV • ADV • CONN • ADJ • V •

Thanks!

