

The Sylheti Project: Documenting and supporting a minoritized language with(in) a digital diaspora

Extending beyond its face-to-face documentation work with the Sylheti-speaking diaspora in London, the SOAS Sylheti Project (SSP) has been expanding its own digital, international diaspora for the recording and maintenance of the minoritized Sylheti language since 2013. The SSP's Facebook group functions as an interactive, on-demand grammar for diaspora or even Sylhet homeland speech communities, and as a means to a documentation that is optimally representative for linguists. Members benefit as they can ask SSP linguists and other Sylheti speakers specific or lesser-explored language queries; language use documented will then also aptly reflect community language needs. Group activities and regulations encourage Sylheti language valorisation and discourage the perceived need for linguistic homogeneity; this similarly ensures a more representative recording of dialectal variation within Sylheti.

This presentation will expand on the aforementioned advantages of the Facebook medium to documentation, as well as outline the tangible ways in which this social media group contributes to Sylheti language maintenance. One such example can be found in the group's creating new readers of the endangered Siloti/Syloti Nagri script, and of a medium through which said readers may "self-publish" and exchange contemporary Syloti Nagri script literature.

Since the SSP's Facebook group has now existed for eight years as an informal digital archive, it can, most importantly, offer long-term predictions of the benefits and stumbling blocks to using the Facebook platform for documentary purposes. This could be of particular value to any online remote linguistic groups established during COVID-19 lockdown measures that are still growing and developing. Tiered levels of in-group moderation, for instance, are discussed as a way to avoid social media in-fighting or harmful refocusing on identity politics as opposed to linguistic investigations.

Given most linguistic queries are member-initiated, the SSP Facebook group draws upon Himmelmann's (2006) proposal that documentary research concerns should be shaped by speech communities, not the researcher. The SSP moreover embraces Blommaert's (2020) theory that online documentation requires the linguist to transition from an observer to participant, which arguably in this instance, repositions the linguist as an activist. It will be posited that perhaps this is the rightful position for linguistic documentary work to be in, in accordance with both long-standing documentary principles (Dobrin and Schwartz: 2016) as well as current disciplinary thought (Roche: 2021).

References

Blommaert, J. and Jie, D. 2020. *Ethnographic Fieldwork: A Beginner's Guide*. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.

Dobrin, Lise M. and Schwartz, Saul. 2016. Collaboration or Participant Observation? Rethinking Models of 'Linguistic Social Work'. *Language Documentation & Conservation* 10: 253-277.

Himmelman, N.P. 2006. Language documentation: What is it and what is it good for? In Gippert, J. & Himmelmann, N.P. & Mosel, U. *Essentials of language documentation*. Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Roche, Gerald. 2021. Rethinking the language of language endangerment. Talk given at SOAS Linguistics Webinars 2021-02-25.