This handbook examines the reasons behind the dramatic loss of linguistic diversity in the world’s languages, based on an estimate that half of the languages of the world are in danger of dying out before the end of the century. It discusses why this matters and what can be done to document and support endangered languages. The book is intended for researchers and for anyone interested in language and culture. Specialists will find detailed and practical advice for documentation while non-specialists will still find up-to-date information on the present situation. There are only a few books available on this topic, so it is a welcome addition. As well as the basic philosophy for endangered languages, it covers issues like culture, documentation, archiving, orthography development, lexicography and literacy, planning, training, support and development. It could be a useful book for anyone interested in the documentation and description of languages. Both editors are based at SOAS, London, in the Endangered Languages Academic Programme.

The book is split into four parts: Endangered Languages, Language Documentation, Responses and Challenges, preceded by an introductory chapter.

**Chapter 1: Introduction.** This chapter sets the scene with a useful overview of endangerment and research centres. It talks about the identification and causes of endangerment and the reasons for getting involved. It then explains why varied approaches are necessary and the main issues that arise from documentation and research. This chapter is far more than just a summary of what is to follow. It provides a good rationale for putting resources into this kind of research.

**Part I: Endangered languages**

**Chapter 2: Ecology and endangerment.** *Lenore Grenoble.* This chapter discusses language shift and UNESCO’s declaration for the rights of indigenous peoples. It also discusses the assessment of endangerment. Examples are given of two scales for assessment, Krauss (1997) and Grenoble and Whaley (2006). The chapter acknowledges that there are several scales, each with their advantages, and promotes the use of one or more to understand the situation. SIL generally uses EGIDS, which is an expansion of three scales including one similar to Krauss. For more information on this see Lewis and Simons (2010).
Chapter 3: Speakers and communities. Colette Grinevald and Michel Bert. This chapter establishes a typology of endangered language speakers and certain attitudes concerning endangerment, including the overlap of linguistics with politics and language activism.

Chapter 4: A survey of language endangerment. David Bradley. Details of endangerment from each continent are given with case studies from Asia.

Chapter 5: Language contact and change in endangered languages. Carmel O’Shannessy. This chapter discusses three outcomes of contact: language maintenance, language shift and language creation. The specific examples are taken from syntactic change. There would be room to enlarge on this chapter with phonological examples, particularly concerning changes in tone, harmony and the segment inventory (see Heath 1984, Yip 2006, Pearce 2009), but this chapter provides a good introduction to the topic. Chapter 5 is a good reminder that languages change and that all researchers need to take into account the influences and complexity that can result from language contact.

Chapter 6: Structural aspects of language endangerment. Naomi Palosaari and Lyle Campbell. Here we see the contributions that documentation can make to linguistic theory, such as the recognition of sounds, sound systems and grammatical systems which have not been previously encountered. The chapter points out that variation can be accelerated in endangered languages. This can have implications for research methods.

Chapter 7: Language and culture. Lev Michael. This chapter acknowledges the important link between language and culture and gives a summary of theoretical frameworks for that link.

Chapter 8: Language and society. Bernard Spolsky. This chapter discusses how languages are classified by society, including the issues that arise from national language policies where certain languages are generally chosen as national languages while others are downgraded as ‘vernacular dialects’ and discouraged in schools, etc.

Part II: Language documentation

Chapter 9: Language documentation. Anthony Woodbury. The author gives a wide definition of language documentation as ‘the creation, preservation and dissemination of transparent records of a language.’ This definition would include poetry, dictionaries, grammars, narrative, videos, etc. But the chapter is actually focused on the best ways of doing documentation for endangered languages. This means a consideration of the intended audience, the motivation of the researcher, the methods of archiving, the types of document, the value to the community and the use of audio records. Many approaches are encouraged even within one programme so that the community, academic and popular interests are all covered. The kind of documentation that merely records texts without linguistic analysis is discouraged here. The author believes that description and documentation should all be part of one process. At the conclusion of the chapter, there is a useful summary of annotating and archiving standards.

Chapter 10: Speakers and language documentation. Lise Dobrin and Josh Berson. This chapter claims that documentation not only preserves data from endangered languages, but also has good
social effects and benefits for the speakers. The research process sets certain social processes in motion. This means that researchers need to be aware of research ethics and moral rights.

**Chapter 11: Data and language documentation. Jeff Good.** This chapter describes kinds of data, methods of recording and transcribing, and the subsequent use of data by the community. Various databases are considered and audio and video resources. The last part of the chapter presents more technical aspects such as the format of the data in digital storage and the metadata that should accompany each file.

**Chapter 12: Archiving and language documentation. Lisa Conathan.** The importance and practicalities of archiving are described in this chapter with details on the types of archival repositories, the ethics of copyrighting, the arrangement within the archives, the metadata and the preservation and access of data.

**Chapter 13: Digital archiving. David Nathan.** ‘It has been estimated that 90 per cent of the world’s recorded cultural heritage materials, many of them unique and irreplaceable, lie stranded on researchers’ shelves, unknown to their originating communities and to the wider world, and irretrievably decaying.’ Recently this situation has improved. This chapter covers the technical issues involved in maintaining archives of a high standard which give easy access and which are stored in a way that is safe.

**Part III: Responses**

**Chapter 14: Language policy for endangered languages. Julia Sallabank.** The issues covered in this chapter are: whether standardisation is helpful, the use of language in education, and the policies of governments and other bodies. UNESCO and others are now placing an overt value on linguistic diversity, but other bodies don’t necessarily agree and in some countries, there is no language policy.

**Chapter 15: Revitalisation of endangered languages. Leanne Hinton.** This chapter looks at the issues surrounding trying to bring endangered languages back to a higher level of use within the community. It covers school-based revitalisation, language classes, bilingual education, immersion schools and adult language learning. Linguistics and documentation are seen as part of the revitalisation. Revitalisation is seen as a good thing in this chapter, so the question of whether researchers should be an agent for change is not really addressed. Rather it is assumed that change will take place and that the researcher can ensure that the change is of benefit to the community.

**Chapter 16: Orthography development. Friederike Lüpke.** ‘The successful creation of an orthography involves the consideration of historical, religious, cultural, identity-related and practical factors in addition to linguistic ones.’ Each of these factors is discussed in this chapter. The relationship between phonetics, phonology and orthography is also discussed. There is a realisation that the key people involved in these decisions, including speakers of the language, government representatives and missionaries, may well not agree. There is also a recognition of some situations where developing an orthography may not be the best thing—including when the language is in flux, as the orthography will tend to freeze the form at a particular point in time and it might not be the best moment to do so. This is a helpful warning. But the author
acknowledges that the attitude of the speakers should be taken into account. The chapter also includes a discussion on the choice of script and the adaptation of that script to cope with suprasegmental aspects of the language. The author stresses that orthography development takes time and that it should not be a quick add-on to a documentation project.

Chapter 17: Lexicography in endangered language communities. Ulrike Mosel. This chapter looks at the challenges of producing a dictionary and the options as to which type of dictionary is the most appropriate. Other topics covered include: the planning, collecting word lists, the entry, the use of examples, idioms and proverbs, the production of the dictionary and the use of workshops to achieve these goals.

Chapter 18: Language curriculum design and evaluation for endangered languages. Serafin Coronel-Molina and Teresa McCarty. Language planning is considered in the context of the curriculum for mother-tongue education, both in schools and in literacy programmes. There are particular challenges in a multilingual context.

Chapter 19: The role of information technology in supporting minority and endangered languages. Gary Holton. Information technology is becoming more prevalent in language-maintenance projects, particularly if speakers are scattered over a wide area and have access to fonts and software. IT can be used to present the language to non-speakers, but also to preserve the language with speakers using the data themselves. Programmes can produce multimedia packages, interactive websites, language-learning materials, dictionaries and discussion groups. The main problems in this kind of production are the evolution of technology and unrealistic expectations.

Part IV: Challenges

Chapter 20: Endangered languages and economic development. Wayne Harbert. This chapter looks at situations where speakers desire to change their material circumstances and believe that a change in linguistic behaviour will achieve this. This can lead to urbanisation, or migration, or language shift with no population movement. The author discusses the ethics of boosting the economy or other types of intervention, including whether it is helpful to use the language itself to generate funds. Both positives and negatives are discussed with several examples, and the author concludes that the situation is complex with no easy answers.

Chapter 21: Researcher training and capacity development in language documentation. Anthony Jukes. The conclusion of this chapter is that the training for researchers must cover a lot more ground than just linguistics and the documentation itself. The responsibilities of the linguist towards the community are also important. The chapter sets out the skills that must be learnt including: linguistics, field methods and documentation skills and the types of programmes that are available. This chapter is a useful reference tool for seeing what is being taught on most of the documentation courses around the world and to see what weight is given to each topic.

Chapter 22: New roles for endangered languages. Máiréad Moriarty. This chapter gives examples of how a language might take on a new role on television, in songs on the internet, or
through texting. Up to now, the media has not always played a positive role in language revitalisation, but in some cases this is changing.

**Chapter 24: Planning a language-documentation project.** Claire Bowern. This chapter is a useful reference tool when planning a project. It lists all the main considerations and where to get information before starting, how to keep records, funding opportunities, the project proposal, the main stages of the project and the evaluation.

**Assessment**

This book is a practical tool that could be very useful to anyone who is involved in researching or working with a language group which is either endangered or near-endangered. Some chapters are more philosophical, but others include useful checklists for planning, training or archiving. I would highly recommend it as a reference book, and would suggest that there should be a copy in at least one library in all countries which contain endangered languages.

As an SIL member, I was pleased to see references to the *Ethnologue*, grammars done by SIL linguists, SIL archiving, bilingual education and Toolbox, but I was disappointed that SIL wasn’t mentioned more in the sections on interacting, development, training, literacy and orthography as these are areas where SIL could give input. I would hope that in future, there will be more interaction and sharing of knowledge between groups working on endangered languages and SIL. That aside, I believe this book gives a good overview of the major centres working on documentation of endangered languages and what has been achieved so far, and it provides an encouragement to keep expanding the field.

**References**


