Endangered languages and the land:
Mapping landscapes of multilingualism (Preface)

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Abstract

The 22nd FEL conference was held in Reykjavík in August 2018. As the title indicates, it was dedicated to the relationship between endangered languages and the land, with a special focus on language maps, aiming at maps that better represent the complex nature of the geographical distribution of speakers and their language competencies and usage. The conference also acknowledged the 20th anniversary of Himmelmann's seminal paper which helped to establish 'language documentation' in its modern sense, and invited papers addressing 20 years of language documentation. – This introduction to this volume of the proceedings from that conference presents the thematic areas that are represented in this volume, and gives a brief overview of the contributions which made it into this volume.

About this volume

This volume of proceedings of the 22nd Foundation for Endangered Languages conference "Endangered Languages and the Land: Mapping Landscapes of Multilingualism" is the first to be published mainly digitally, via the online-publisher "EL Publishing". We hope that this is welcomed by the readers, helps encourage research and activism about endangered languages, and indeed leads to a fruitful lasting collaboration between FEL and EL Publishing.

This current volume also differs in some other aspects from the previous practice of FEL proceedings. As already started last year, most of the contributions went through a double-blind peer reviewing procedure. Our hope and intention is that this will increase the standing and weight of these publications, through securing high quality in their contents. Of the papers included here, only three have not been peer-reviewed, all for different reasons. We agreed on publishing these, nevertheless, honouring the tradition of FEL to be open to scholars and activists with very different backgrounds, needs and preferences.

A side-effect of the new procedures is that the volume gives a less complete picture of the conference as it unfolded. So, as it happens, none of the three distinguished keynote speakers were able to submit a written version of their talks.

Main themes of the 22nd FEL conference

Endangered languages and the land

There is a strong connection between languages and the places where they are spoken. Land is a key part of the identity of a language speaking community. The lexicon and structures of a language are shaped by speakers' appreciation of local geographical and ecological features. Contact-induced language change can reflect the ways that geography has influenced patterns of contact. Toponymies (place naming practices) reflect the languages that are or were spoken in a territory. Today, the availability of a territory where a language is 'at home' is one of the key factors for its vitality. In countries where Indigenous peoples seek land rights, their affiliations with languages can be factors in success.

The conference posed questions such as: how do language endangerment scenarios vary in different regions in the world? What roles do land (or lack of it) play in speakers' continued use of their languages? To take one example, many Indigenous communities in Australia have immutable connections between language and land, and language affiliations follow from people's relationships with land. In other parts of the world, scattered communities can retain their identity through sharing a common language communicated across distances.

We have four papers contributing to this theme. Christina Ringel addresses in her paper "Claiming vitality" one of the core issues in this context: "How identification with territory and language influences language vitality",

showing the importance of the land in the case of the Miriwoong, as well as a responsibility of the Australian authorities.

In a similar setting (in some aspects) marked by conflicts, Marilena Karyolemou's "Language revitalization, land and identity in an enclaved Arab community in Cyprus" shows by way of example of the Maronite community how the loss of land leads to language loss.

Then, in "Landmarks and Kwoma identity", Renee Lambiert-Bretiere discusses how various landmarks serve as symbols of identity for the Kwoma (Papua New Guinea).

Finally, Rebekah Ingram demonstrates, utilizing Mohawk and Seneca descriptive place names as examples, how the map can act as an interpreter to facilitate cross-cultural understanding of concepts. Her contribution "Mapping indigenous landscape perceptions", which illustrates how maps can enhance our understanding of concepts underlying place names, is already leading over to the second section of this volume.

Mapping landscapes of multilingualism

As an elaboration of the 'language and land' theme, we invited contributions which aim at answering the question 'How can we make relationships between language and land visible?' Evidently, language maps are a frequently-used tool. However, current practice in language mapping needs to be further developed. Most current language maps use either points or bounded areas (usually non-overlapping) to represent the location or range of individual languages – but the true language landscape is typically much more complex than that.

One reason for that is multilingualism. In many parts of the world, there are complex layers of languages that perform complementary functions in the life of communities. Many individuals are multilingual, whether as Indigenous people, members of a minority speaking a heritage language, migrants bringing their language into the diaspora, as language learners in a globalized world, or people interacting on-line in a lingua franca with the global community.

We hoped for papers describing innovative approaches that seek to represent these much more intricate patterns through mapping or by similar means, making use of digital technology or other cartographic methods and devices. We were in particular interested in attempts to answer questions such as 'How can diglossia be shown? How can we better research and display the distribution of domains where languages are used? How can we visualize language shift and other changes over time?'

We were positively surprised how many participants answered this call and contributed to this topic. Six contributions made it into these proceedings.

The first, "Why we need better language maps, and how could they look like", by one of the editors, Sebastian Drude, laid the ground, so to say, for this theme, giving an overview of current types of language maps and formulating a list of desiderata for future language maps, where different language domains could be represented in different layers.

Still preparing the ground, Adam Stone offers "A typology for understanding and evaluating maps of Indigenous languages", i.e., the Evaluative Map Typology (EMT), a structured observation survey tool intended to compare linguistic maps systematically.

Then we had a number of contributions presenting individual atlas or map projects. "Mapping worldwide language use through public engagement" by Tess Wood and Michelle Morrison outlines a crowd-sourcing, so to say, approach to mapping language use rather than speaker location, in line with some of the desiderata formulated by Drude.

Erik Anonby and his co-authors contribute with "Mapping language and land with the Nunaliit Atlas Framework: Past, present and future", also presenting a collaborative mapping platform designed for creating interactive online atlases, which is being applied with success to the language of Canadian Inuit, and the languages of Iran, and other planned projects.

Also Kumiko Murasugi discusses the "Atlas of the Inuit Language in Canada: Mapping and visualizing language beyond the land", going conceptually beyond geographical maps such as dialect charts, but also discussing 'sculptionaries' and kinship term systems as being more or less 'map-like' because of a (possibly abstract) relation to 'places'.

Finally, still in the high north (fitting with the venue), Olesya Khanina and Yuri Koryakov show creative solutions in showing multilingualism, migration patterns and language shift over the last 200 years in a sequence of maps. Their contribution is entitled "Mapping the Enets speaking people and their languages".

Also two key-note speakers addressed this theme of the conference, but their contributions are not included in these proceedings: Jeff Good presented "Mapping multilingual repertoires: A case study of a rural African region", and Kristine Hildebrandt "Mapping language practices (and language prospects) in Nepal".

Special theme: 20 years of language documentation

2018 marks twenty years since the publication of Nikolaus Himmelmann's seminal paper "Documentary and Descriptive Linguistics" in Linguistics. Since then, Language Documentation has developed, mainly as a response to the need to make lasting records of the world's many endangered languages, and to support speakers of these languages in their desire to maintain them. Funding programmes such as DOBES, ELDP and DEL have supported language documentation activities with language communities, encouraged linguists to work with primary (digital) data, and, more broadly, raised public awareness of language endangerment.

These activities are now needed more urgently than ever, as in most areas of the world the pressure on local communities to shift to major languages has increased, and language maintenance activities are often insufficient to prevent language shift. Yet, it may seem that Language Documentation is already over its peak, and national or regional uptake through funding, establishing dedicated centres and academic chairs, or proactive language policies has overall been slow.

Under this special theme, we invited papers that would reflect on current practices in Language Documentation as a part of efforts to counter language endangerment, its impact in the academic sphere, and its contribution to language vitality and linguistic diversity.

Although indeed several speakers made significant references to language documentation (and Himmelmann), only one paper that specifically addressed this theme is here included. In compensation, this one contribution covers many different aspects of reflecting on '20 years of language documentation', because Bradley McDonnell, Andrea Berez-Kroeker, and Gary Holton presented a commemorative volume they edited, called "Reflections on documentary linguistics".

The two other keynote speakers also dedicated their talks to this topic (though not included here). Jost Gippert looked back in his keynote "20 Years of Language Documentation – and before?"; Claire Bowern looked into the future, with "Language Documentation and description, and what comes after".

Other contributions

As always, the FEL conference was, besides its main (and special) themes, also open for general contributions on endangered languages. This volume includes four such contributions; interestingly, two of them are dedicated to on-line systems.

Gary Holton gave interesting insights in the future of the Endangered Language Catalogue which underlies 'endangeredlanguages.com' in his contribution "ELCat open data: Creating a next generation catalogue of language vitality". The most notable changes proposed include providing easier access to download and deposit primary data; adding a time component so that changes in vitality can be tracked; and tracking non-endangered as well as endangered languages.

Roman Yangarber presented the Revita project, providing "Support for endangered and low-resource languages via e-Learning, translation and crowd-sourcing". The system is currently deployed for several Finno-Ugric and Turkic languages. It pioneers in leveraging existing NLP tools; providing personalized learning; making the learning process maximally interesting, flexible and stimulating; and engaging the learner in the active production of language.

Aleksandr Mankov presented the fascinating case of, and many examples from, "The dialect of Gammalsvenskby: Scandinavian-Slavonic language contact". This is a Swedish dialect spoken in the Kherson province, Ukraine, and is highly endangered.

Finally, in "Dynamic multilingualism and language shift scenarios in Indonesia", Maya Ravindranath Abtahian and Abigail C. Cohn presented a quantitative study based on a survey and other sources, showing the nature of dynamic multilingualism (rather than a simple language shift scenario). They observed a significant socio-geographic effect differentiating between "inner" vs. "outer" islands in the Indonesian archipelago.

Contributions without peer-review

For different reasons in each case, three contributions to this volume have not undergone a peer-review process. We offer these to the interested reader because that has been the tradition with earlier FEL proceedings, and because these are interesting contributions to the conference.

In her short contribution "Is the Icelandic Sign Language an endangered language?" Rannveig Sverrisóttir answers this question with a qualified 'yes', although the scenario continues to develop dynamically. Interestingly, recent migration to Iceland is strengthening this probably smallest national sign language.

A large author team from the Australian National University led by Jane Simpson offers an informative overview of "Census data on Australian languages", which are often problematic given the complex language ecologies with intricate patterns of multilingualism, language loyalties and revitalization efforts.

Finally, Mujahid Torwali and Jakelin Troy contribute with a paper "Places of the heart: issues in Indigenous place naming in Torwali of northern Pakistan and Aboriginal languages of south eastern Australia" to the 'languages and the land' theme with two interesting perspectives as members of the respective communities and intriguing results on the role of place names.

Final remarks

The eighteen papers in this volume provide a good, but not complete impression of the diverse and splendid contributions to the Reykjavík conference. The four keynotes and six further regular papers are not included here. We are very happy and a little bit proud of having managed to bring together so many excellent scholars and activists, and in particular of the intense and truly interactive intellectual atmosphere of the conference.

We are currently working towards continuing the 'language map' theme in a dedicated network.