Creating Talking Dictionaries for Endangered Languages

Endangered language communities are rapidly adopting new digital technologies to revitalize their mother tongues. This talk explores the collaborative process and impact of creating Talking Dictionaries for endangered languages (www.talkingdictionary.org). The Living Tongues Institute has created more than 80 talking dictionaries, for languages having as few as 1 fluent speaker (Siletz Dee-ni, spoken in Oregon, USA), and in locales ranging from Russia to India to Micronesia. We explore the uses of these digital resources by a variety of stakeholders: speakers, educators, linguists, language activists, and technologists. We also assess the effects of this technology on the languages and speaker communities. For example, talking dictionaries can facilitate the creation of new lexemes, they can contribute to standardization of orthographies, they can raise awareness of dialect differences, and they can lend prominence to traditional knowledge in domains such as ethnobotany. As minority languages cross the digital divide, their growing presence in online dictionaries—as well as domains such as text messaging, software localization, social media, and streaming video—can be viewed as an indicator of increasing language vitality.