Thoughts on prioritizing the documentation of endangered languages

Paul Newman (2013) has recently expressed a provocative critique of the discipline of language documentation, which, he claims, is undermining sound practice in field linguistics. Dobrin et al. (2007) had already pointed to the fundamental tension between the demands of scientific objectivity on the one hand, and the moral imperative on the other, which has characterized endangered language documentation since its inception. Newman's attempt to resolve this tension essentially involves dismissing the moral imperative as scientifically irrelevant, and advocating a return to the traditional benchmarks of fiedwork-based linguistic analysis. This view is contrasted with those such as Himmelmann (1998), who have attempted to define a distinct scientific discipline "documentary linguistics" as the framework for endangered language research. Although some of Newman's criticisms merely echo earlier debates (Haig et al. 2011), they are nevertheless worth reassessing with the benefit of hindsight and the experience gained in large-scale funding initiatives of the last years. In particular, I will make some suggestions for teasing out just what is behing the "moral imperative", how it can be integrated into a research programme, and what would follow from such a move in terms of the prioritizing of funding allocation for endangered language documentation. Time permitting, I will relate these ideas to the situation of endangered languages in the Republic of Turkey, and for formulating strategies for their documentation.

Newman, Paul 2013. The Law of Unintended Consequences: How the Endangered Languages Movement Undermines Field Linguistics as a Scientific Enterprise. Talk held at SOAS, Online at:

http://www.soas.ac.uk/linguistics/events/deptseminars/15oct2013-the-law-of-unintended-consequences-how-the-endangered-languages-movement-undermines-field-.html