

Collaborative Documentation as a Catalyst for Language Maintenance

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Goal

To show how (in the absence of language maintenance activities) *collaborative documentation* projects can inspire efforts for language maintenance from within the community.



“... Linguists often play a very important role in inspiring communities to start the process of revitalizing their languages. The very act of linguistic documentation ... can give people in the speech community new views on their language, and show them opportunities they might not have been aware of before.”

Hinton (2011:307)

Documentation → Maintenance

Documentation is linked to revitalization/maintenance

Documentation is a foundation for revitalization/maintenance.

“... it seems that documentation itself is the cornerstone of well-focused revitalization efforts. In the most striking cases, the availability of rich documentation has made revitalization projects possible even when there have been no actual speakers of the language for a considerable time, as with the Native American languages Myaamia and Wampanoag.”

(Dorian 2018: 221)

Maintenance → Documentation

Documentation is linked to revitalization/maintenance

Documentation is also being shaped by language reclamation, revitalization, and maintenance.

“Linguistic documentation has been increasingly informed by community desires...” (Hinton 2011:307)

See also Hermes & Engman (2017), who demonstrate how reclamation is shaped the documentation of Ojibwe Conversations

Engaging communities

No one-size-fits-all model for
engaging communities or
initiating language maintenance.

“... for those who find themselves working within communities that are indifferent, ambivalent, or otherwise unprepared to take action with respect to their language ... , calls for collaboration do little to address how linguists might ethically engage in field research when their specifically language-related services are not in demand.”

(Dobrin & Schwarz 2016:225)

Nasal

Multilingual speech
community in
southwest Sumatra



Nasal speech community

- Nasal language is spoken by ~3,000 in 4 villages
- Not known to linguists until 2007 (Anderbeck & Aprilani 2013)
 - “Flies under the radar”
- Nasal speakers are multilingual in:
 - Kaur (~40,000 speakers)
 - South Barisan Malay (~1.5 million)
 - Bengkulu Malay
 - Indonesian
- Asymmetric multilingualism
- No institutional support; many village heads, school principals are *not* Nasal

From documentation to maintenance

01

Discussions

Early discussions of language maintenance in Nasal speech community

02

Documentation

Documentation efforts combined with training and capacity building.

03

Burgeoning language maintenance

Emergence of several efforts to create resources for language maintenance.

Early discussions

McDonnell (2017) reports (from the researcher perspective) early discussions around collaborative project.

Prospects

1. Community welcomed me in and showed general interest in the project
2. Responses to inquiries about creating language materials, “we are happy to help you in whatever you would like to create”

Challenges

1. No language/cultural committee
2. No discernable leaders who could/should be involved in a language project
3. No language/culture initiatives

Documentation

Collaboration



Project team members

1. Members of Nasal community
2. Indonesian and US-based linguists
3. PhD students

Documentation: First steps

2017:

- Preliminary wordlists
- Establishing relationships

2019:

- Conversational recordings
- Grammatical elicitation

2020-2022:

- Transcription
- Capacity building
- More recording*



Training & capacity building

Build capacity: Equipment (laptops, headphones)

Training

1. Transcription
2. Translation
3. Glossing
4. ELAN
5. FLEx

Discussions

1. Orthography
2. spelling



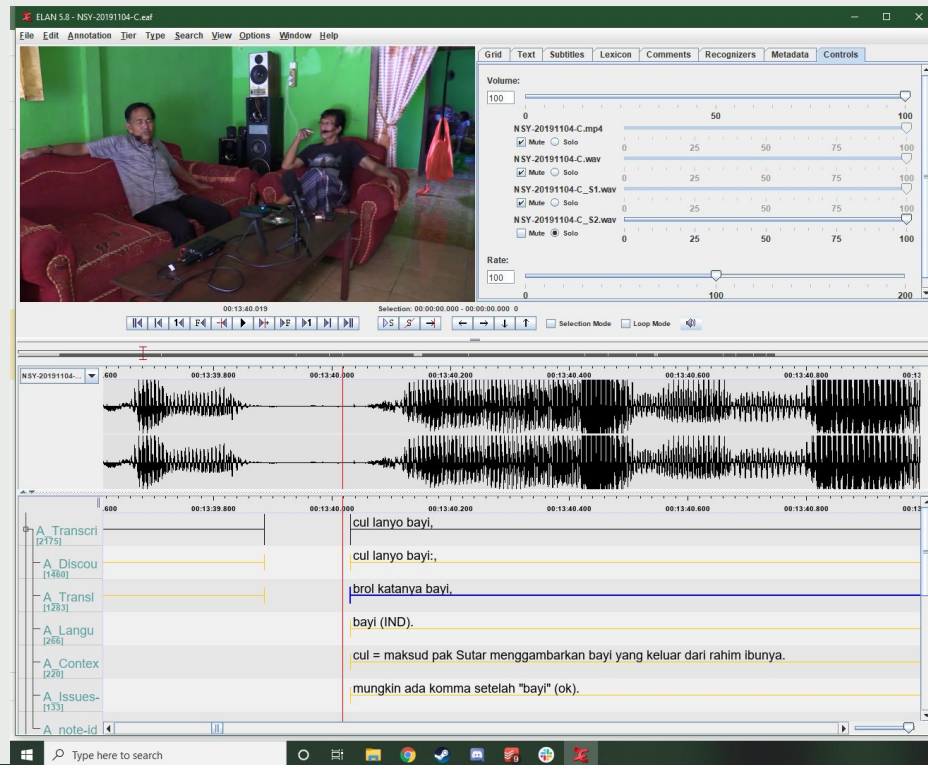
Transcription, annotation, training

Ongoing transcription project

- Transcribed by Nasal team members
- Transcriptions checked weekly with detailed feedback
- Transcribed files imported to FLEEx, Indonesian word gloss added

Continuous training built in to transcription process

- Increased technical proficiency (ELAN, discourse transcription)
- Building metalinguistic awareness (Intonation Units, morphology, phonology)



Expanded training

Response in the pandemic

Recording equipment ordered and shipped to team members in Nasal

Training provided remotely

Team members independently creating media



Documentation: Projects



2023:

- Sociolinguistic survey
- Prosodic analysis
- First dictionary recordings
- Counting & alphabet books



Concrete collaborative projects
gave place for discussion about
language use and future

Documentation: Engagement

2024:

Draft dictionary portion
Cik Sitian, Sengkukho

2025:

First draft dictionary
First community workshop
...



Anecdotes



Since the beginning of the
dictionary project...



Language maintenance

Dictionary development

Began with initial elicited
wordlist collection

Community engagement with
dictionary started as passive

Later transitioned into Nasal-led
four-person discussion groups



Dictionary development



1st community workshop

- 25 Nasal speakers
- Supported by local government
- Centered on draft dictionary

Feedback was overwhelming

Johan's books

Specialized topics discussed for dictionary

Johan saw a second purpose: writing books on local tradition

Already written three books and planning new projects

TRADISI PENGGAWIAN KEKHEJOAN CAKHO NASAL (KUMPUL, AYAU-AYAUAN, NGEKHEMPAH)

A. Kumpul.

Kumpul hago kekhejoan sijo cakho Nasal amun biloni wat khuo kelih.

1. Kumpul Miadingan.

Kumpul Miadingan sijo, khetinyo ngumpulun miadingan-miadingan kuntan njak belah hulun tuho hulun sai hago kekhejoan sudi, khadu ni miadingan-miadingan sai masih wat ikukan khalah njak hulun tuho hulun sai hago kekhejoan sudi muni, kheti cawo miadingan tian sai masih taling, khan meuwat pandai ngilak mpuk khan tian jauh talingnyo.

Api guduhyo amun biloni sudi, setuwo biloni bahun awak ntangan Nasal sijo, ani agi bahun tinggang ungin. Kung yo bahun lepak njuk bahun awak ganto. Bahun tinggang, sisai khesi, keduikannyo agi hatuk hajai. Anido hulun biloni makhi kumpul miading sijo. Guduhyo kumpul miadingan sijo, tian nyekhitokun baso tian bahun sudi hago kekhejoan. Na, amun ngeliakkun keadaan bahun tian hago kekhejoan sijo, ngapi amun njuk hago ngehimpun jelemo khami, katu bang tehekhus.

Jadi tian semiadingan sijo jenu kumpul guduhyo hago nakhup tian bahun sai hago kekhejoan sudi, jeupo cakhyo makhi tian pandai ngumpulun hulun khami dibahun tian sudi kaenti. Njak ngeliakkun keadaan tian bahun sijo jenu khetinyo, duwik penggawian sai hago sanik amun kan hago saniki, helaui amun kan hago helaui, jeudi muni tegakkun amun kan hago ditegakkun. Ido yo biloni sudi utamonyo kumpul miadingan sijo, tian hago setulungan ngehelaui bahun, ngehelaui hatuk, ngehelaui dapukh, negakkun khan mesak hulun kekhejoan kaenti khan sai layinnyo. Delum penggawian sijo duik muni khinci khamuan sai hago kupakhi, njuk kayu, buluh, sesuk, huwai. Kumpul miadingan sijodo ani khan tian biloni bepeham. Kebilo wali tian hago ngekhadokun, ngumpulun khamuan amun kan khamuan, amun khamuan kak tekumpul jeudi muni, kebilo wali tian hago ngganganinyo. Njuk hago nyecap buluh nyanik khesi, nyikhuk sesuk kai hatuk, jeudi muni mbelahi huwai kai pengikuk.

Na, amun khamuan kak wat ungin mulaido miadingan sijo jenu nggawikun penggawian-penggawian sai kak dipehamkun tian delum kumpul miadingan jenu. Hinggonyo tian bahun sai hago kekhejoan sijo jenu kak liaki tian, kak dapuk amun hago ngumpulun jelemo khami kekhejoan tian sudi. Khadu ni amun ungin-ungin penggawian sijo jenu kak khadu sun, mpai tian miadingan sijo jenu bepeham nentukun dengi wali hago kumpul peneluhan.

Readers

2023: Alphabet and counting books first discussed

- Feedback positive, but again passive

2025: Rediscussed at dictionary workshop

- Additional book ideas
- Small dictionaries



Conclusion

1. Members of different communities may not be ready or interested in initiating language maintenance efforts:
 - documentation itself may be a good avenue for beginning language work
2. Relationships take time
 - engaging in collaborative documentation activities may be a good avenue for building trust.
3. Collaborations change over time and it takes time to build them.

“... the articulation of any one set of common features as essential for doing ethical field research overlooks much of the complexity and diversity of what goes on in particular researcher-community relationships”

(Dobrin & Schwartz 2016)

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