

Missing link: A centralised digital archive for endangered languages of Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

Language endangerment and language loss is a worldwide phenomenon. As a result, the scramble to identify, document and preserve indigenous languages using digital technology has gained traction. The challenge we face in Southern Africa, is the lack of a centralised digital archive for endangered languages. Currently, efforts are dispersed on various platforms, hosted by universities, non-government organisations or private collections, if digitised at all. In order to provide a holistic description of endangered and extinct languages in Southern Africa, an online digital archive could centralise existing efforts, while creating opportunities for the digitisation of historical records and new digitised entries.

Introduction

Despite vast research in the field of language vitality, “*Relatively little is known about Africa’s endangered languages.*”¹ In Southern Africa, identification and documentation of endangered languages in collaboration with indigenous communities has only fairly recently begun. Records of such efforts are dispersed in various locations around the world. Some are digitised and archived, whereas others are not, and are slowly being lost.

Elsie Vaalbooi ‡xoa...

Praat ons, ons taal. Ek sê, hier is die man wat ek gekry het, die eerste man, en hy het weggeraak. Lat ek hom nou nie sien. Nou weet hy nie wat soek ek nie...ek kon amper nie met hom praat nie. Maar ek moet met hom praat, want hy’t moeite gedoen om te kom. En ek is bly om hom te sien en te groet. Maar nou praat ek nie meer nie, ek loop lê, ek is siek. En met ons alles, my mense, ek dink ek het seker nou genoeg gepraat. En waar ek sal nog ’n bietjie praat waar ons alleen is sodat ek kan asem kry. Ek meen dat hy vir my vra dat ek byval wat ek gesê het om voor te loop nog sê. Ek dink ek het nog ’n bietjie om te sê. Maar ek sal nou op hierdie heilige oomblik, sal ek dit nie sê nie, want ek is moeg. Ek het my nou genoeg onderwerp. Dis maar nog hy, ou Elsie Vaalbooi. **He ||u ‡hoa, he ||u !hoi a.** Nou ja, **||u noh nji.** Nou ja **||u** nog **tju.** Nou nog **!hou.** [Rietfontein, South Africa, 1997]



Elsie Vaalbooi photographed in 1997 and 1911. She was a mother tongue speaker of N|uu. In this message she mixes Afrikaans and N|uu. Today only 4 speakers remain.



Elsie Vaalbooi says....

My language is my first husband, who disappeared. After all these years I see him again and he doesn’t know what I want. I’m so nervous I can hardly speak to him but I have to speak to him because he took the trouble to return. I’m happy to see him and greet him but I can’t speak anymore, I’m old. But I will speak a little more where we can be alone and I can catch my breath. What he asks it appeals to me, but I am very tired, I have subjected myself to enough. After all, it is still me, the same old Elsie Vaalbooi. What was said, what ran away. He doesn’t see or hear anymore. Now it is still the land. [Rietfontein, South Africa, 1997]

Mtango Kamia ke....

Ka ma gu a he a ua n||a'an semukahe ua n||aan. A khan ||ang !Xun ||ang. Ta dju ke ||ang dju ba shing thali ta dju ke ||ang ||ang dju u ke poamo. Ta ka dju u ke n||aan ne koe tci wicese kae ||ue panga. !Eh khan ||ue o ||ang he ne koe ge'e. Ta ke ||ha dju tane he koe t'hala tane koe glua. Dju ba shing he ne koe dju de shing. Ta ||ha ka ndoa wa n|oh he wa n||ang he wa !hoan ka ng dju ||e||e ke o ka dju ku 'm, n||ang, !hoan, n|oh. Dju ng-a ka ndoa a ma sa'a, dju ba sing ke g||'eh-a dju he ke gae-a dju kho ke a n|ulu n|e sing. Ko ng keh ||'an dju ke !ahva, !avha, !avha, !avha ta... ta ng !eh khan matangua ya ng !eh khan |oa ka sa'a ka |una ka ta !ho. [Platfontein, South Africa, 2014].



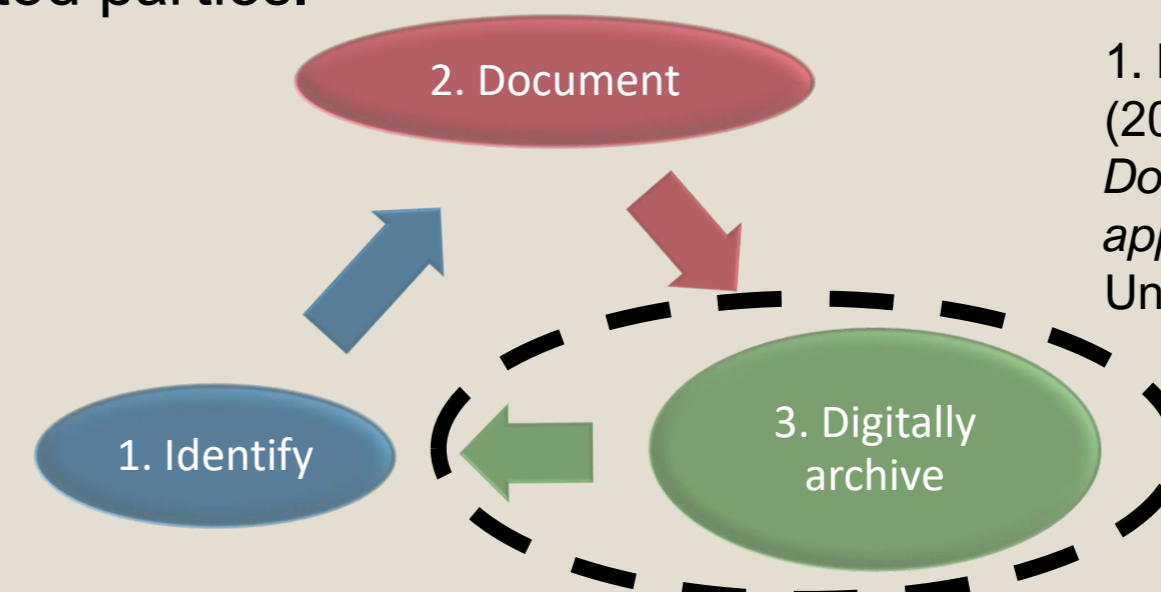
Mtango Kamia is a mother tongue speaker of !Xun (approx. 15 000 speakers remaining). She was born in Angola in 1925 and is currently living in Platfontein, South Africa

Mtango Kamia says...

If I take you and you grow up, then you will speak !Xun. We speak our Father's language and we speak our language until the end, until we are grown up with all the things that they did. Then they do and show us also how to dance and sing. They show us how to sing and do the big dance. It's our parents who taught us. The meat of the roan antelope, and the eland and the kudu is what our parents made for us and we ate it, eland, kudu and roan antelope. This is what our parents gave to us. To move your shoulders and here we clapped, clapped, clapped, clapped our hands and...and these days we don't hear it anymore, we've lost it and we just sit. [Platfontein, South Africa, 2014]

Conclusion

Accessibility by endangered language speakers to existing records and resources in their own languages is scarce. This disconnection extends to members of the public, educators and researchers who struggle repeatedly to gain an understanding of our historical and contemporary context. The creation of a centralised digital archive for endangered languages in Southern Africa should prioritise local needs, such as: 1) foster accessibility to content via appropriate cultural means; and 2) encourage a reciprocal and accountable relationship between remaining speakers and outside interested parties.



References

1. Kandybowicz, J., and Torrence, H., (2017). *Africa's endangered languages: Documentary and theoretical approaches*. New York: Oxford University Press.



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