

Negotiating meaning through linguistic legacy materials

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In the past decade, linguistic legacy materials have seen increasing interest in their use, as well as attempts at identifying overarching themes or issues that unite projects recovering and curating these materials (e.g. Dobrin & Schwartz 2021). While a one-size-fits-all guideline or a meticulous description of the necessary steps cannot be offered due to the complexity of the issues and the individual challenges posed by each data set, advances have been made to identify the nature of linguistic legacy materials on a meta-scientific level. This paper aims at summarising the current state of research and illustrating some crucial findings that lend themselves for discussion with present-day grammarians, grammaticographers, or language documenters.

Apart from the need for interdisciplinary approaches in reconstructing media, historical contexts, or socio-cultural settings, an emphasis in the reconstruction of linguistic legacy materials lies on discursive and meta-discursive acts of meaning-making. Abstract knowledge about observations or interpretations is cast into material formats that endured through time, from which present-day linguists and language workers aim to derive insights into historical language use and sociolinguistic settings. This presents the work with linguistic legacy materials as a constructivist effort, drawing from different material and abstract sources like archival artefacts, linguistic knowledge, or historical accounts, which are all combined in the linguist's effort of reconstructing contexts and (re-)negotiating meaning. The constant (re-)interpretations and (re-)contextualisations make linguistic knowledge less tangible as the objectified legacy *material* suggests; each movement between sources, establishing intertextual ties, ascribes new social meaning to artefact *and* linguistic datum (Weber 2023). This perspective is also captured in the perspective of "social lives of linguistic legacy materials" suggested by Dobrin & Schwartz (2021), investigating both social contexts within the materials and in their proliferation and reuse. Subsequently, linguistic work with legacy materials connects people across disciplinary boundaries, professional contexts, time and space – it becomes a reflection of linguistic practices in the present and the past, and a negotiation of meaning across these contexts. As such, it lends itself as an ideal stage to discuss current and historical practices in linguistics and language work, overall.

References

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