

Documenting The Poetics and Rhetoric of Endangered Languages

Poetics and rhetoric are the most difficult aspects of a language to translate. They are among the first things to be lost when the social sphere a language occupies is shrinking. They present a problem for documentation and description, because they are often key to understanding the unique ways in which different grammars filter and illuminate the human experience, and yet they are typically the most difficult aspects of language to detect in the course of ordinary elicitation. This universal problem for linguistic documentation is compounded by scarcity of resources when the language being documented is endangered.

To illustrate the importance of understanding and analyzing poetics and rhetoric in documenting a language, and the importance of recording as much conversation and narrative as possible in aid of that goal, I will present four examples from critically endangered languages of North America. Two are drawn from extended fieldwork with Mohawk (ISO moh) and Montana Salish (ISO fla), respectively, and two are drawn from work with a 27,000-page collection of texts written by native speakers of Meskwaki (ISO sac) in the last years before English replaced Meskwaki as the main language of use on the Meskwaki settlement.