Language documentation in the 21st century

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In the last decade of the 20th century a new sub-field of linguistics emerged that has come to be known as ‘language documentation’ or ‘documentary linguistics’ (Himmelmann 1998, 2002, 2006, Lehmann 2001, Austin 2010, Grenoble 2010, Woodbury 2003, 2011a). In this paper we explore how it was defined in the seminal work of Himmelmann (1998) and others, including what were presented as significant characteristics that distinguished language documentation from language description. A focus on best practices, tools and models for documentary corpora appeared in the following years, along with more critical discussions of the goals and methods of language documentation. The paper examines some current developments, including new approaches to archiving (Nathan 2010, Woodbury 2011b), and suggests that in the 21st century language documentation needs to adopt a more socially engaged approach to linguistic research.

References