

Discussions on Legacy Materials (DiLegMa) – opportunities and challenges for descriptive linguistics

The numerous political and ecological crises of the last years have palpably demonstrated that access to field sites can quickly be severely restricted for linguists engaged in language description around the world. Furthermore, issues of environmental responsibility and sustainability are motivating linguists working on languages that require long-distance flights to reconsider their workflows and data sources. Those factors have resulted in a renewed interest in utilizing legacy materials to supplement one's own field data.

Legacy materials, which may result from colonial, missionary, earlier scientific enterprises or other activities, can present a number of challenges. From a contemporary perspective, they may seem deficient both with regards to content and methodology. Modern trained linguists may be faced with unfamiliar terminology, ontological systems, frameworks, presentation style or typographies.

At the same time, legacy materials may provide numerous valuable insights for contemporary descriptive projects, so that consideration of their inclusion in such projects can be advisable. They may contain otherwise inaccessible or unattested lexical and grammatical information or textual materials in registers or genres absent from the contemporary corpus. Additionally, legacy materials are often the only source on an extinct or dormant language and therefore play a major role in revitalization efforts.

For these reasons, legacy materials should, where they exist, be part of the methodological toolbox of descriptive linguists. However, depending on the region and language family, there are considerable differences in how thoroughly and comprehensively legacy materials are accessible, developed and utilized. Furthermore, the evaluation and use of legacy materials is a time-intensive task and requires the support of experts, e.g. library and archive scientists, specialized philologists and historians of linguistics.

The objective of this workshop is to facilitate a dialogue between descriptive linguists who engage with legacy materials of different language (families) and with different levels of experience. This exchange shall help to establish legacy materials as a relevant data source for descriptive projects and to improve sharing of best practices among researchers. The workshop also responds to the increasing emphasis on sustainability by encouraging the reuse of existing resources and by addressing the methodological challenges that descriptive linguists may face when working with legacy data.

We invite presentations on specific findings or challenges related to the use of legacy materials. Questions that may be addressed in the presentations include:

- What are the reasons that legacy materials are dismissed and why are these hard to deal with from our current perspectives on data and data collection?
- What are possible ways to make these materials usable and how can they be fruitfully integrated into a description project? What sort of elements can be extracted, both in terms of primary data and in terms of a meta-grammaticographical analysis of older practices? Do textual, grammatical and lexicographical legacy materials require different approaches?

- How do we deal with questionnaires, which were not necessarily collected long ago, but in a specific framework or with a specific goal?
- How do we deal with unprocessed / raw field notes of other linguists?
- How do we deal with lay publications such as school materials or language course books?
- How can we extract metadata where no explicit metadata information is given? Equally, how can data be “stripped off” of a certain framework? How can this framework be identified?

The workshop is designed as a bridging event which brings together knowledge from different areas, but also more advanced, experienced researchers with junior researchers at the beginning of their career. In this sense, the workshop is also intended to be of educational importance for the new generation of descriptive and documentary linguists who want to enhance their skill repertoire and to acquire tools for dealing with legacy materials. The participation of people working with legacy materials for the first time is particularly encouraged.

The workshop will take place on 24-25 April 2025 and will be hosted by the Institut für Sprachwissenschaft (ISW) at the University of Bern, which has been actively engaged in descriptive linguistics and language documentation of endangered languages for several decades. This workshop builds on momentum from an event held in Paris in April 2024 (“Legacy materials as data sources for language description and documentation”).

The deadline for submissions is 15 December 2024. Abstracts (anonymized, maximally one page with font size 12, including examples, but excluding references) should be sent to dilegma2025@gmail.com and will be evaluated by the scientific committee. Notifications will be sent out by 24 January 2025. For more information, see https://www.isw.unibe.ch/forschung/workshops/discussions_on_legacy_materials/index_ger.html.

Selected bibliography

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