Bringing a corpus in line with deaf communities’ perspectives

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Roadmap

1. Corpora and preservation
2. Corpora and communities
3. Involvement of communities
4. Precedents for corpora and communities
5. Working with communities
6. Pilot survey and follow-up
7. Challenges, strategies and questions

Corpora and preservation

Create a corpus of a language via systematic data collection, annotation and archiving

One purpose: preserve a language for community awareness and practical purposes (language can be endangered but not always)

Compare:
Maintenance - sustain an endangered language
Revitalization - revive an extinct language

Corpora and communities

More literature on creating a sign language corpus has focused on methodology and technical aspects

Less discussion about best practices for linkages between universities and deaf communities in building a corpus that is also intended for language preservation

Involvement of communities

a) Community awareness of own language
   - value of storytelling, poetry, narratives
   - appreciation of changes over time
   - understanding of regional differences
Involvement of communities

b) Practical applications to language instruction
- deaf children (SL as L1)
- high school / college students (SL as L2)
- future teachers of deaf children
- future interpreters

E.g. NGT Corpus: “can use the movies . . . as materials for excercises in both productive and the receptive skills”
(http://www.ru.nl/corpusngtuk/using_the_corpus/types_of_use/)

Precedents

As a starting point, useful to look at earlier examples of purposeful linkages between universities and communities in language preservation:
- National Association of the Deaf
- Indigenous communities

National Association of the Deaf

Made efforts in early 20th century to preserve ASL by filming signers

Signers, e.g. Amos Draper and Edward Miner
Gallaudet, worked at Gallaudet College

Navajo community

“Members of the Navajo Language Academy have been working together since the early 1970s to further the goals of Navajo language scholarship through research on Navajo grammar, the development of pedagogical materials, and work in language planning”

“The Navajo Language Academy approach is to teach people how to do scientific research on the Navajo language, to discover the rules and principles underlying the grammar.”
(Navajo Language Academy brochure)

Working with communities

Ask a community what they desire from a linguistics project (Jessie Little Doe Fermiino (Wampanoag) and Sandra Deer-Standup (Mohawk), SULA 1, UMass, 2002)

A survey is one way to determine what the deaf communities desire from a corpus.

Such a survey can also be used to build further contacts within deaf communities.

Pilot Survey

- Gathering of deaf youth in the US
- 50 respondents (70% women, 30% men)
- Average age of 24 years
- Most (82%) learned ASL before 5 years of age

Note percentages do not always add up to 100, because there are either no responses, or the respondent doesn’t know, or doesn’t understand the question
State of ASL

Do you think there will be more people using ASL in 300 years?  Yes  No

Do you think the mainstreaming of more deaf children will affect the number of people using ASL?  Yes  No

Do you think current medical technology is already reducing the number of deaf people who use ASL?  Yes  No

State of ASL

Sample comments:

“The world is now better educated about sign language. There’s increased popularity in (foreign language) schools, etc.”

“The more we share ASL all over and definitely will be people using ASL”

State of ASL

“People are talking about it, digital age allow Deaf people to reach out easier”

“The deaf community’s getting stronger so I can imagine ASL becoming one of the well-known languages by then”

Reflective of comments suggesting ASL will continue due to a strong base of signers, even if the number of deaf people using ASL is reduced

Preservation of ASL

Should ASL grammar be taught to Deaf students in K-12 and beyond, in parallel to English instruction?  Yes  No

Should there be a campaign to preserve ASL as NAD did in early 1900s?  Yes  No

⇒ Indicates the deaf community will provide support for building a corpus even if ASL will continue

Leading ASL Preservation

Next question: Who should take the lead in all of the efforts to preserve ASL?

Questions for follow-up survey

a) Migration patterns - solicit information on where respondents have lived and worked to obtain a better picture of migration patterns, which will help with site selection as well as understanding variation

b) Content of corpus:
   - Individual signs and sentences in isolation?
   - Narratives, conversations and monologues?
   - How to format the presentation of signs?
   - How much information per sign?
Questions for follow-up survey

c) Specific content tailored to specific audiences
   - e.g. SL teacher: what kinds of information do
     you often wish you had while planning a class?

d) Ownership: Is providing open access to the
   corpus sufficient for the purpose of ownership by
   the deaf community?

In closing

Ideal for universities and deaf associations to
deeper their linkages for mutual benefit from a
sign language corpus

Challenges:
Is deepening linkages with the deaf community in
creating a SL corpus considered sufficient
reciprocity?

Or, should the corpus team give something more
back to the deaf community, and if so, how?

Strategies

Consultants
• Involve deaf signing consultants in high-level
decision-making
• Establish advisory boards (possibly two -
   community and scientific)

Website
• Explain corpus in depth, making the whole
  project transparent to the communities
• Post vlogs to pull in the interest of the deaf
  community and foster discussion of their language

Strategies

Outreach at local level:
• Have contact people give regular updates on
  the corpus project
• Provide training on how to access and use the
  corpus for a specific purpose, like developing a
  curriculum for teaching a sign language as L1

Strategies

Outreach on larger scale:
• Present and run exhibition booths at various
deaf gatherings (e.g. National Association of
  the Deaf, SL Teachers’ Association)
• Collaborate with local, state and national
  associations of the deaf in hosting “Open
  Houses”

Closing question

How effective have you found the strategies for
strengthening linkages between universities and
deaf communities if you have tried them already?