

The Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas

*** SSILA BULLETIN ***

An Information Service for SSILA Members

Editor - Victor Golla (golla@ssila.org)
Associate Editor - Scott DeLancey (delancey@uoregon.edu)

-->> --Correspondence should be directed to the Editor-- <<--

Number 247: November 1, 2006

247.1 Correspondence

- * ISO standardized language codes and the Ethnologue (A. Aristar)
- * Some thoughts about Ethnologue's codes and SIL (W. de Reuse)

247.2 Linguistic Anthropology at Southern Illinois U - Carbondale

247.3 E-Mail Address Updates

247.1 Correspondence

* ISO standardized language codes and the Ethnologue
~~~~~

From Anthony Aristar ([aristar@linguistlist.org](mailto:aristar@linguistlist.org)) 29 Oct 2006:

I have been involved with the issue of language codes for many years -- since, indeed, the Santa Barbara workshop that the LINGUIST List organized in June 2001 on standards for linguistics. At that time it became clear that a standardized set of language codes would be essential if language documentation was to move into the digital world. SIL's Ethnologue was the obvious candidate. From the beginning, however, I felt that SIL was not the appropriate organization to handle language codes, for, though I myself felt no hostility towards the organization, I was well aware that others did, and I thought this might inhibit the general acceptance of the codes.

However, it was hard to see any good alternative to the Ethnologue code-set. For all of its errors and problems, there was nothing that came anywhere close to its completeness and coverage. Replicating the code-set in another form would require resources and research time that were simply never going to become available. As a result, I felt that we would all gain most by (1) improving and correcting Ethnologue, and (2) moving the Ethnologue codes from a private to an international standard.

The logic behind the second point is as follows: What is done with a private code-set is no one's business but that of the organization that owns it. But once something is a standard it becomes harder and harder for a single organization to keep control of it. The standard will,

inevitably, move from being private property to public property.

This has already begun to happen. Ethnologue's code-set is no longer \*owned\* by SIL. As a near-standard, SIL simply \*curates\* it. The process, in short, of moving the codes from a privately owned object to an internationally-owned one is well on its way.

I think you can see why I am so disturbed by attempts to shun the emerging ISO 639-3 standard. It is a major advance on anything that has existed in the past, and it is more than half-way to being divorced from SIL. In a few more years, after corrections and extensions, and the acceptance of ISO 639-3 as a full standard, we will be in a position to say that it should be curated by an international body, and the divorce will be complete.

If, because of opposition, this does not happen, we who work in digital documentation will be left in a bad situation. I must be blunt. There is now simply no feasible alternative to the use of Ethnologue. Nothing comes close to its completeness and coverage. The UNESCO Red Book project is not a valid substitute, since it is intended to cover only endangered languages, and in any event is nowhere near complete. North America and Australia are totally uncovered, and even in areas where there is coverage large numbers of languages are simply missing. Furthermore, no set of codes is available from the Red Book project. This may not seem like a large issue, but unique codes are absolutely essential to large digital documentation projects. The names are simply far too ambiguous for search engines to use. In addition, the Red Book provides only a small number of alternate and dialect names. Ethnologue has many more, even if you discount those that are there in error.

Another reason why there is no alternative now to Ethnologue is that, whether we like it or not, this code-set has been accepted by almost every major language documentation initiative. LINGUIST List uses it, OLAC uses it, PARADISEC uses it, LSA uses it, DoBeS uses it...and I could go on. In fact, it would be hard to find a digital organization that does not use it. This is not surprising, since it is the Ethnologue codes that provide interoperability, and this is the core of what all these organizations are trying to do-to build systems that will allow easy, precise exchange of linguistic data. To start all over now with a new set of codes would simply not be feasible. We don't have the resources for that.

So let me urge you all to consider working, not towards an abandonment of Ethnologue coding, but rather towards international community control of it as the emerging standard. Anything else will do the discipline of linguistics more harm than I care to contemplate.

--Anthony Aristar  
Director, Institute for Language Information & Technology  
Moderator, LINGUIST List  
Eastern Michigan University  
[aristar@linguistlist.org](mailto:aristar@linguistlist.org)

\* Some thoughts about Ethnologue's language codes and SIL  
~~~~~

From Willem de Reuse (rwd0002@unt.edu) 30 Oct 2006:

The recent discussions by Hein van der Voort (SSILA Bulletin #242), with

response by M. Paul Lewis (SSILA Bulletin #244), and further support of Van der Voort's position in Patience Epps et al. (SSILA Bulletin #246), regarding the role of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) in creating a reference standard for the languages of the world, have all been quite informative. However, I am somewhat disturbed by some statements on both sides.

On the one hand, Van der Voort makes the strong claim about SIL (also quoted by Epps et al.) that we linguists might be "potentially contributing to its ultimate goal - that of replacing indigenous cultures." On the other hand, Lewis responds by strongly downplaying the religious proselytizing role of SIL and by emphasizing its language development work.

I agree that a religious organization should not be in control of the ISO 639-3 standard, and we all know that SIL is in fact a religious proselytizing organization. But the fact that SIL can and should be characterized as such need not prevent us from collaborating and dialoguing with the many superb colleagues who are members of this organization.

I don't know whether many of us fieldworkers, who deal with SIL members as well as with their opponents, are concerned about some future polarization of the issue. I for one would find it preferable if the issue of ISO 639-3 and the legitimacy and amount of SIL involvement could be discussed without reference to ethical concerns regarding SIL, and without reference to the emotionally and politically charged issue of what the ultimate goal of SIL might be.

--Willem de Reuse
University of North Texas
rwd0002@unt.edu

247.2 Linguistic Anthropology at Southern Illinois U - Carbondale

From Andy Hofling (ahofling@siu.edu) 30 Oct 2006:

The Department of Anthropology at SIUC (<http://www.siu.edu/~anthro/>) is building its graduate program in Linguistic Anthropology and invites interested students to apply. SIUC has a vibrant four-field department, where students receive training in all major sub-disciplines. Linguistic anthropology students are trained in current linguistic and sociocultural theory as well as current methods of linguistic description and analysis. Our approach to language is ethnographic and eclectic, stressing the need to master basic analytic skills in order to address anthropological problems.

Our faculty include Janet Fuller, whose research currently focuses on the social roles of language in bilingual communities (<http://www.siu.edu/~anthro/fuller/index.html>); C. Andrew Hofling, whose interests include Mayan linguistic history and language documentation (<http://www.siu.edu/~anthro/hofling/index.html>); and Anthony Webster, whose research focuses on Native American verbal art (<http://www.siu.edu/~anthro/webster/index.html>)

Some major themes of special interest to the faculty include:

Discourse approaches to language and culture
Native American languages and their documentation
Orality, literacy and cognition
Discourse genres and verbal art
Linguistic practices and power relationships
Language and identity
Linguistic and cultural history
Language in its social and cultural contexts and functions
Bilingualism and language shift

The Department has a Linguistic Anthropology Lab with equipment for analog and digital audio and video recording and analysis. Interested students and others are encouraged to visit our web page where information on the program and application materials are available:

<http://www.siu.edu/~anthro/>

--C. Andrew Hofling
Department of Anthropology
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, IL 62901-4502
ahofling@siu.edu

247.3 E-Mail Address Updates

The following additions or changes have been made to the SSILA e-mail list since the last Bulletin:

Cable, Seth scable@mit.edu
Francis, Hartwell hfrancis@email.wcu.edu
Mateo-Toledo, B'alam tbalam@mail.utexas.edu

When your e-mail address changes, please notify us (golla@ssila.org).

THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES OF THE AMERICAS

Victor Golla, Secretary-Treasurer & Editor

P. O. Box 555
Arcata, California 95518-0555 USA

tel: 707/826-4324 - fax: 707/677-1676 - e-mail: golla@ssila.org

Website: <http://www.ssila.org>

The SSILA Bulletin is distributed electronically to all members of SSILA. Non-members may subscribe free of charge by sending their e-mail address to the editor (golla@ssila.org).

SSILA also publishes a quarterly hard-copy Newsletter that contains book reviews, notices of journal articles and recent dissertations, and other news and commentary. The Newsletter and other publications of the Society are distributed only to members or to institutional subscribers.

SSILA welcomes applications for membership from anyone interested in the scholarly study of the languages of the native peoples of North, Central, and South America. Dues for 2006 are \$16 (US) or \$20 (Canadian) and may be paid in advance for 2007 and 2008 at the 2006 rate. Checks or money orders should be made payable to "SSILA" and sent to: SSILA, P.O. Box 555, Arcata, CA 95518. For further information, visit the SSILA website (<http://www.ssila.org>).