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“Dying to be counted”: Academic research and the fate of undescribed and endangered languages

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Abstract

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2008 as the International Year of Languages. In the last decade or so, we learned that the rich landscape of languages in the world is threatened. Much effort is put into national and international governmental and research programs to increase awareness of our unique linguistic diversity. The subject areas are referred to as: endangered languages, extinct languages, small or minority languages and less-commonly taught or underrepresented languages. The paradox is that universities and departments that traditionally covered these subject areas increasingly find themselves in a difficult situation. They are threatened with closure or curtailment of the smaller and more exotic language departments.

Scholars, libraries and publishers will need to work together to document and disseminate all necessary research. Publishers face specific technical and commercial challenges to make this a sustainable commitment. Bibliographical standards, Unicode, rendition practices, archiving procedures and inclusion of sound and images all call for professional acumen and collaborative work among the academic community. Only through adoption of standards, the full multimedia use of the Internet, and innovative and hybrid business models the challenges can be met. Brill is eager to join the efforts to work towards the conservation and defense of the world's rich language heritage. Throughout its history of 325 years of scholarly publishing Brill has produced and published works that support the philological tradition of language studies. Its programs in oriental and religious studies have created numerous linguistic publications of lasting value. Now we also see

opportunities to publish audiovisual materials to document linguistic studies through databases distributed over the Internet.

The commitment to support research programs in endangered languages requires a long term vision and major investments from all parties and is not without risk. By making vast amounts of research and primary source materials findable and available we may expect keen interest from other disciplines and from general linguists, such as those involved in typology (i.e. researching the structures of the world's languages).