Multimedia Mapping and Language Documentation: Developments, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Despite long-standing connections between humanities and geography, until more recently, these linkages were fleeing or casual in collaborations and methods, reflecting more the tendency of geographers to be the discipline boundary crossers, and with goals of application and tool development rather than long-term engagement in more substantive theoretical discourses. Things are changing now, and some examples of recent initiatives aiming for interactive spatial representation of current documentation themes include the Nepal Languages Interactive Atlas (http://www.siue.edu/~shu/nepal9.html), the Romani Project at the University of Manchester (http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/), and mapping of travel narratives in Ahtna (Na-Dené, Alaska;) using Google Maps (Berez 2011).

This talk briefly surveys the history of "geo-humanities," with a focus on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) as it has been applied to investigations both outside of linguistics (e.g. geo-histories, literary landscapes) and within (e.g. typology, sociolinguistics, and language documentation). The potential for mutual benefit in the GIS-language documentation context in particular is huge. More obviously, GIS visualization of documentation benefits grammatical description in itself as an output, as grammars vary widely in their lexico-grammatical coding and conceptualization strategies (Slobin 1996, Bickel 1997, Harrison 2007). Beyond this, language documentation (particularly of threatened languages) also benefits on an awareness and understanding of the spatial-temporal interplay of language practices, variation, and contact dynamics (particularly in multilingual and shifting areas). This all helps to form a more comprehensive profile of variables that contribute to survival/threat scenarios and the ways in which languages may change in slow death scenarios.