1.1 Why another handbook of fieldwork methods?

Linguists engaging in fieldwork have traditionally focused on a grammatical analysis of a language that may never before have been subjected to this kind of scrutiny. With increased awareness of the number of endangered languages (see Evans 2010, or Harrison 2010) has come a stronger emphasis on recording a range of material while in the field, also giving rise to language documentation as a distinct methodology within linguistics. This recognition of the loss of linguistic diversity has led to support for the ongoing use of these languages and the production of records of as many different aspects of the language as possible. At the same time the development of new technological approaches to language recording allows us to record more and to create richer textual annotations of recorded media than we could in the past. Linguists are in a position to record much more than narratives and example sentences, but need guidance once the topics of discussion go beyond everyday expertise.

We can characterize the new methods and tools associated with language documentation as forming a new paradigm of research. This paradigm focuses on collaboration with speakers and on the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge systems, of which language is one part. A further focus is on primary data as the warrant for analytical claims, and emphasizes replicability of the analysis resulting in such claims. From this new paradigm flows the need to create reusable primary data, and to provide for its accessibility and longterm curation.

p. 2 A linguist may be the only outsider to learn and prepare materials in a given language and culture, and so this handbook aims to increase the usefulness of those materials, both in their form and their content. The form of records can depend on the quality of recordings made in the field and this can vary considerably depending on the type of equipment used, the expertise of the user, and the environment in which the recordings are made. The ability to keep track of the various outputs of fieldwork (recordings, transcripts, fieldnotes, images, texts, analyses, dictionary and so on) requires planning and an explicit methodology. Advice on optimizing both the form and content of field material is provided in this volume.

Sanjek (1990) discusses the transformation of primary ethnographic data into ‘analysis’, a topic that has occupied many anthropologists but not so many linguists. Linguists typically operate in a framework that starts from a set of data and applies a method that originates most recently in the structuralism of Saussure and Sapir—described in a number of fieldguides and manuals (surveyed by Mosel in Chapter 3 of this volume). While this method begins with data collection, the data is soon relegated to what Marcus (2009: 22) calls a ‘present absence’—it is claimed as the basis for the conclusions provided in a grammatical description, but is not provided to allow verification of those claims. There has been an interpretive leap from linguistic fieldwork to analysis that has been described as using ‘inductive generalizations’ but which has not presented primary data together with the analysis, thus weakening the claims that can be made and not allowing reanalysis of the generalizations arrived at by the fieldworker. As advocated in various chapters in this collection, data can (and should) now be more central to linguistic analysis, and, if it is curated appropriately, can be reused in ways not originally planned for by the fieldworker, so that we can ‘anticipate a future need to know something that cannot be defined in the present’ (Strathern 2004: 7).

The focus on documenting endangered languages can be likened to salvage anthropology, which has been criticized as an attempt to capture some authentic version of a culture before it is ‘tainted’ by contact with other cultures. It is the case that the project of language documentation includes recording aspects of a range of human knowledge systems that exist without the influence of metropolitan languages, or perhaps in cases where such influence is not yet as complete as it is likely to be. The particularities of each language provide insights into the range of possible diversity of human expression, and it is often in the discourse of monolingual speakers of a generation before extensive shift to a metropolitan language that these particularities are still to be found. Lest this be construed as a defence of the appropriation of indigenous