

Handling 20th-century legacy materials in the 21st century

Inge Genee
Iniskim University of Lethbridge
inge.genee@uleth.ca

In April 2022 I discovered that professor Donald G. Frantz had left his entire archive in his office on campus before he passed away in the Fall of 2021. The materials cover his entire career from the late 1950s to the late 2010s. The most valuable are fieldwork recordings and transcriptions from the 1960s through 1980s, notes and recordings for Blackfoot language courses, and notes for a Blackfoot dictionary (Frantz & Russell 1989, 1995, 2017) and grammar (Frantz 1991, 2009, 2017). There is also some material for Cheyenne and Plains Cree. The family and the university left it to me to decide what to do. I have since been working with Blackfoot research assistants to inventory, catalogue, digitize and describe the materials in preparation for archiving and community distribution.

A colleague recently called it “a crisis in documentary linguistics,” referring to similar collections of legacy materials at risk of being lost if not handled appropriately (Johnson 2004). Unfortunately, what was considered appropriate in the mid-20th century is not what is considered good practice in 2024 (Smythe Kung et al., n.d.; Brandão et al. 2023). In this talk I will discuss some of the dilemmas we encountered while working with the materials.

Preservation. Physically, the audio materials consist of reel-to-reel tapes, cassette tapes, CD ROMs, and VHS tapes, and the written materials are mainly handwritten and typed notes and prints of computer files of which the original no longer exists. The student research assistants digitized all audio-recordings and scanned all paper records.

Metadata. The recordings have no metadata at all. If there is a matching transcription this sometimes contains an acronym which we could trace back via the acknowledgement sections in the published dictionary and grammar. The transcriptions do not include any ethnographic notes or other information other than sometimes a date and location.

Rights holders. The main rights holders are the speakers on the recordings or their families if they have since passed, and the language communities. (The Frantz family relinquished all rights.) The most pressing task is to identify these speakers, but given the lack of metadata it is unlikely we will ever be able to identify them all. No consent forms have been found – they probably never existed. Listening to all the recordings has only occasionally yielded a name or a recognized voice. We now aim to minimally identify the dialect that each recording is associated with so we can return copies to the communities. Identifying appropriate representatives (individuals or groups) for this is another as yet unresolved issue.

Archiving. The University of Lethbridge recently agreed to archive the physical materials. We plan to deposit digital copies in one of the DELAMAN archives that offer levelled access, and are actively seeking organizations in the Indigenous communities to donate copies to.

Funding and time. Archiving is not sexy. I received a small internal grant in 2022 but have since then mostly funded the work by redirecting funds from my other grants and devoting significantly less time to my other research work. This will soon not be sustainable.

References

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