Introduction
With the recent trend toward language activism, language development is a term that is entering the vocabulary of the language documentation and conservation movement. For instance, “We should not only be documenting these languages, but also working … to promote language development in the necessary domains” (Krauss 1992:9). However, the term has yet to be fully embraced by the movement; there appear to be misgivings about the term and what it might mean. And it has yet to be legitimized by appearing in a dictionary of linguistics. This poster argues for the suitability of the term and proposes a three-sense definition.

Known misgivings
Some known objections to using the term in relation to documentation and conservation activities are:

- The term is already used within linguistics with a meaning related to language acquisition.
- It is patrimonial to imply that an oral language is not fully developed in its own right.
- It is imperialistic to think that we as outsiders can develop languages.

The next three sections address these in turn.

1. At the individual level
It is clear that the predominant use of the term language development in the linguistic literature has to do with the process starting early in life by which a person acquires language. This should thus be the first sense of meaning in a definition of the term.

Because of this established usage, some linguists object to the way the term is used by language activists. However, language development has a social side as well as an individual side. Just as biologists look at development from the standpoints of ontogeny (development from embryo to adult) and phylogeny (development of a species over time), so too can linguists. Scholars who study language acquisition focus on the development of language in individuals, while those who study language policy and planning focus on the development of language in society.

2. At the societal level
Some object that speaking in terms of development denigrates minority languages. In the early days of sociolinguistics, Einar Haugen (1966) offered a useful definition: “What is meant by an ‘undeveloped’ language? Only that it has not been employed in all the functions that a language can perform in a society.” Thus, the notion of “developed” is not a binary one, but one that forms a cline since there are so many ways a language can function in society. Language development happens when a society elaborates its lexicon to talk about new domains of knowledge (like HIV/AIDS or the Internet), or when an oral society adds the ability to use its language in writing to communicate across distances in space or time, or when a society implements using its language as a medium of instruction in formal education, or when a nation state begins to use a particular language for conducting all of its official business.

In Reversing Language Shift, Joshua Fishman (1991) introduced the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) which places languages on an 8-level cline of contrasts of their language in modern Norway.

3. As an activity
The term language development refers not only to something that happens to language in society, but also to the planned activities that people undertake in an effort to make it happen. Language planning is a well-established subdiscipline of sociolinguistics, and it has been linked with language development ever since the very first definition of language planning that appeared in the literature: “Language planning is the effort to guide the development of a language in the direction desired by the planners” (Haugen 1959).

Haugen (1966) went on to develop a model of how this works. He identified four aspects of language development that are crucial in the process of adding functions as a language climbs the development scale. These are: (1) selection of norm, (2) codification of form, (3) elaboration of function, and (4) acceptance by the community.” These components form a two-by-two matrix in which one dimension contrasts the form of language (1 and 2) versus the functions of language (3 and 4), while the other dimension contrasts language as a system of signs for encoding and decoding messages (2 and 3) versus language as a system of shared practice in a society (1 and 4).

Conclusion
Language development is a term that the language documentation and conservation movement can and should embrace. Indeed, the plight of endangered languages calls us to get involved in the process of helping language communities to restore the functions of their language in their society and to strengthen its use by adding new ones. In so doing we will situate our discipline in the mainstream of the global agenda for human development which affirms a people’s “right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit … their … languages” (UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 13).

References


