Why make books for people who can't read? A perspective on documentation of an endangered language from Solomon Islands.


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This paper explores the issue of documenting an endangered language from the perspective of a community with low levels of literacy, I first discuss the background of the language community with whom I work, the Lavukal people of Solomon Islands, and discuss whether, and to what extent, Lavukaleve is an endangered language. I then go on to discuss the documentation project. My main point is that while low literacy levels and a non-reading culture would seem to make documentation a strange choice as a tool for language maintenance, in fact both serve as powerful cultural symbols of the importance and prestige of Lavukaleve. It is well known that a common reason for language death is that speakers choose not to transmit their language to the next generation (e.g. Winter 1993). Lavukaleve is particularly vulnerable in this respect. By utilizing cultural symbols of status and prestige, the standing of Lavukaleve can be enhanced, helping to ensure the transmission of Lavukaleve to future generations.