



Information Research – Vol. 30 No. iConf (2025)

# Beyond language archives: proposing the archival community informatics framework as an interdisciplinary link to revitalization lexicography

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir30iConf46942>

## Abstract

**Introduction.** Lexicography, or the practice of compiling dictionaries, has profound impacts on how information, culture, and identity are understood and communicated. The emergence of revitalization lexicography serves as an example of community informatics practices in which societal implications of dictionary building are investigated and refined by and for minority language communities to reverse epistemic and cultural erasure.

**Method.** To advance engagement of information and archival sciences with revitalization lexicography, this conceptual paper proposes the archival community informatics framework. The framework is then mapped to current revitalization lexicography projects as an entry point to understanding the information practices of communities engaging in revitalization efforts.

**Results.** Mapping the framework to existing initiatives reveals commonalities between archival and lexicographical community informatics, as well as areas for methodological support from the information science and archives fields to aid revitalization lexicographers in the cultural heritage preservation functions of minority language dictionaries.

**Analysis.** This paper argues for further information science analysis of dictionaries—with a conceptualization of dictionaries as archival repositories—housing collections of word definitions, cultural values, traditions, and information practices. The authors posit that through interdisciplinary engagement, the information needs of minority language community members and revitalization lexicographers can be supported.

## Introduction

Studies of language archives—repositories housing language data, including linguistic fieldnotes and grammatical sketches among other materials—have contributed to the establishment of disciplinary ties between information science (IS) and linguistics (Burke et al., 2020). Other products of linguistic practice, like dictionaries, are often excluded from the IS inquiry, beyond studies of their functions as materials within collections. This paper argues for IS analysis of dictionaries as archival repositories which house collections of word definitions, cultural values, traditions, and information practices. To encourage IS and archival engagement with lexicography, this conceptual paper proposes the archival community informatics (ACI) Framework of archival functions in *revitalization lexicography*—the practice of constructing dictionaries to revive a minority language (ML) while prioritizing the input and needs of ML community members (Anderson, 2020). The framework is then mapped to current revitalization projects as an entry point to conceptualizing the information practices of ML community members and lexicographers engaging in revitalization efforts.

## The archival lives of dictionaries

Community informatics (CI) refers to applied research efforts that promote the use and development of information technologies to benefit communities (Averweg & Leaning, 2011). A defining feature of CI is that uses of information technologies are guided by a ‘*proactive social responsibility*’ to people instead of pursuits of information or technological advancements for their own sakes (Gilliland & Flinn, 2013, p. 20). Thus, in archival community informatics (ACI), the cultural and information needs of (often underserved) communities are prioritized above other archival functions such as custodial control and preservation of archival holdings (Bastian & Alexander, 2009; Caswell et al., 2018; Lee, 2021). While preservation and care for archival holdings are key to ACI, care for materials never overrides care for people. Rather, the archival stewardship of materials is done in service of communities in community-based archives. Cook’s (2013) treatise on archival paradigms describes this as part of the community paradigm of archives, wherein archivists ‘*work in the community to encourage archiving as a participatory process shared with many in society*’ (p. 114).

Furthermore, ACI work explicitly seeks to center the needs of individuals who are subjects or creators of archival materials, rather than outsider researchers (Bastian, 2003; Carter, 2017; Roeschley, 2023). Similarly, when engaging in revitalization lexicography, lexicographers are required to shift their dictionary building practices away from outsider linguistic researchers to focus on ML community members whose familial languages are suppressed and endangered. Through this community-centered approach to lexicography, conceptualizations of dictionaries shift from technical reference resources to repositories of community cultural heritage.

Of the thousands of world languages, the majority are incredibly localized and often under-resourced, with 41% classified as endangered (The Language Conservancy, 2023). Language endangerment is exacerbated by cultural marginalization of ML communities, political instability, and natural disasters—factors that also increase loss of life and forced migration of language communities from their homelands (Woodbury, n.d.; Chelliah, 2021). Historically, the eradication of Indigenous languages and cultures by colonial authorities was common (Mojela, 2008; Pine & Turin, 2017; Hinton et al.; 2018, Anderson, 2020). In cases where Indigenous and other MLs were preserved by dominant groups and governments, it was often with aims for the languages ‘*to transmit and disseminate an imagined Christian modernity*’ (Pine & Turin, 2017, p. 3).

While dictionaries were purported to be value neutral, lexicography played a central role in epistemic and cultural erasure. Through the Enlightenment Era, dictionaries served larger ‘*nation-building*’ efforts toward linguistic purity, with majority European languages positioned as ‘*gold standards*’ and instruments of ‘*a power that academies seized to relegate minority languages or*

*dialects to a secondary position'* (de Castro Fario Salgado, 2021, p. 67). Remnants of epistemic and cultural annihilation continue as even dictionaries created for the preservation of MLs have historically been subjected to institutional/colonialist objectives as opposed to the specific needs, desires, and overall flourishing of the language communities in question (Sear & Turin, 2021).

Efforts to reverse these practices involve language revitalization and reclamation projects with overarching goals of supporting initiatives that result in young people in ML communities understanding and speaking their heritage languages. While such efforts can only succeed if fueled by the ML community, they can often benefit from collaboration and knowledge-sharing with outside researchers. The term *revitalization lexicography*, coined by Anderson (2020) for the Tunica Language Project, positions dictionary-making as a CI tool to reverse ML loss with,

*the explicit acknowledgment that collecting, cataloging, and organizing language is not a neutral act and that the way in which said lexicography is conducted has a material impact on language use, perceptions, and attitudes* (p. 7).

This conceptualization of lexicography breaks from Western traditions which prioritize clinical linguistic inquiry over the well-being of language community members. Rather, it is equivalent to conceptualizations of archival practice stemming out of critical archival studies which also break from scholarly and professional traditions regarding the stewardship of archival materials (Caswell et al., 2017; Wick, 2017; Ghaddar, 2022). Often grounded in ACI, critical archival scholars argue that prescribed depictions of archival practice as neutral, standardized, and purely technical work allow archivists to hide their '*social and cultural responsibilities*' in constructing the archival record (Jimerson, 2006, p. 28).

Just as revitalization lexicography places importance on language communities over linguistic researchers, community archives prioritize '*community values over the centralized and bureaucratized control and ownership of traditional mainstream archives*' (Poole, 2020, p. 662). Within community archives that center and serve the needs of minoritized and underrepresented communities, archivists and other community memory workers reject neutrality and

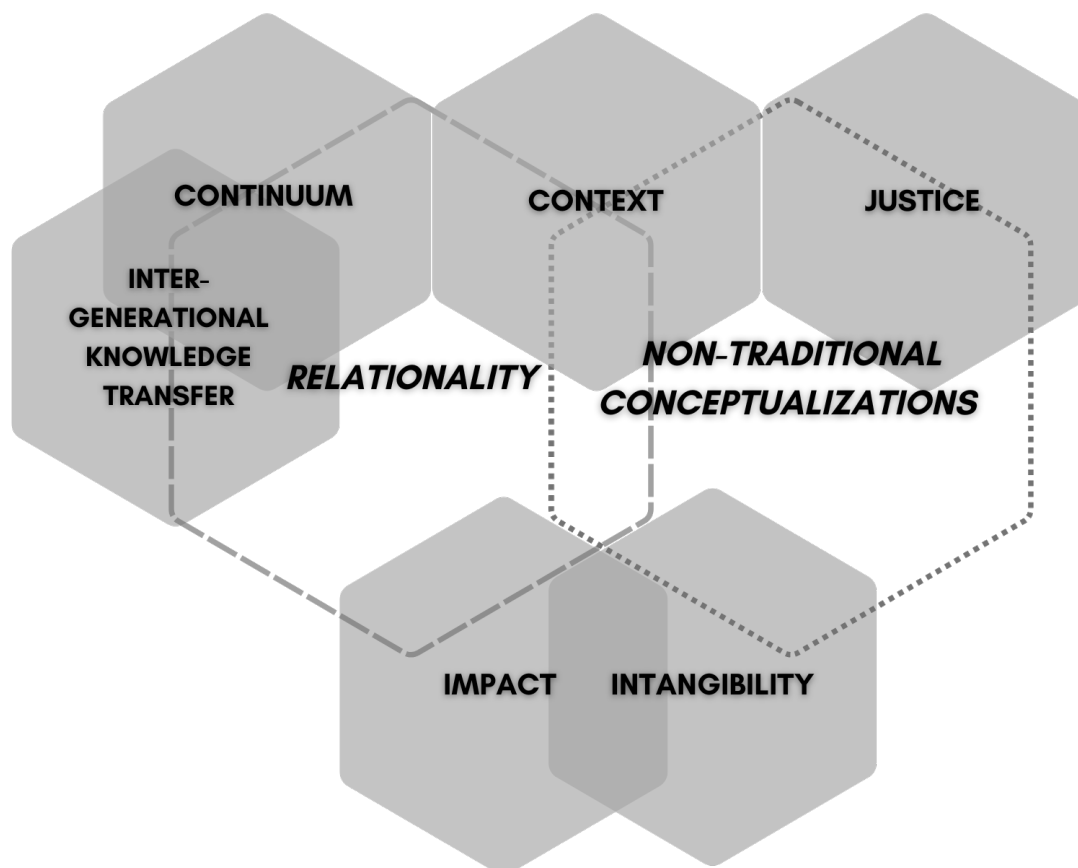
*value people over stuff. The stuff—what gets collected—is only as important as it enables connections between people, who use the stuff to share stories, transmit memory, and build relationships* (Caswell, 2021, p. 18).

Similarly, the CI work in revitalization lexicography prioritizes community needs over technical and pure linguistic research functions (Cablitz, 2011). Because language is so intertwined with identity, a dictionary can occupy overlapping linguistic and extralinguistic '*social roles*' including (but not limited to) a community pedagogical development tool, an access point for certain cultural knowledge, a reference material for language learners, an instrument to enhance language prestige, and, in some cases, a source of grammatical information for outside linguists in addition to the intended language community (Anderson, 2020; Chelliah, 2021; Chelliah, 2023).

Despite these obvious overlaps, there is little existing scholarship connecting the community-based approaches in archival (and wider IS) and lexicographical fields. The presence of disciplinary silos is especially concerning as it suggests that there is little to no methodological support from the IS and archives fields to aid revitalization lexicographers in implementing and stewarding the cultural heritage preservation functions of ML dictionaries. Increasing interdisciplinarity between IS and linguistics has resulted in language archives better serving the needs of their users—including users who belong to ML communities (Burke, 2023; Zavalina & Chelliah, 2022). However, dictionaries are not traditionally thought of as archival repositories, but only as materials sometimes found in an archive. Could applying a functional archival lens on dictionaries and lexicography aid in the ACI work done by revitalization lexicographers?

## Proposing a framework of archival community informatics functions present in revitalization lexicography

A previous scoping review investigation resulted in the ACI framework (presented in Figure 1), which identifies ACI functions that are present in revitalization lexicography (Frederick, 2024). This conceptual paper further tests this ACI framework by mapping its functions to three revitalization lexicography initiatives, with the aim of investigating functional areas where IS and archival studies fields can support cultural preservation and CI efforts in the revitalization lexicography field.



**Figure 1.** Archival community informatics framework of archival functions in revitalization lexicography

As shown in Figure 1, ACI functions in revitalization lexicography are interrelated, and much like archives and dictionaries, do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, these functions are most useful for CI research when applied in conjunction with each other. The foundational level includes two overlapping foundational root concepts: *relationality* and *non-traditional conceptualizations*. *Relationality* illustrates how memory, evidence, people, and place are all interrelated within their own societal contexts. As such, they reveal both power structures and the ties that bind people to each other and to their epistemic values. *Non-traditional conceptualizations* point to information behaviours, preservation practices, and theory-development that are outside of the traditional Western canon. Flowing out of *relationality* and *non-traditional conceptualizations* are six functions of ACI which are overwhelmingly applicable to revitalization lexicography: *impact*, *inter-generational knowledge transfer*, *continuum*, *context*, and *justice*, and *intangibility* (described in Table 1).

Foundational Root	Function Name	Definition
Relationality	<i>Impact</i> (overlaps <i>Intangibility</i> )	Umbrella concept for certain, often immediately intangible, embodied notions such as affect, identity, collective memory. The impact in question can be positive or negative depending on the broader circumstances.
	<i>Inter-generational Knowledge Transfer</i> (overlaps <i>Continuum</i> )	Details the act or desire to pass one's knowledge and/or heritage on to one's younger generation for the sake of cultural continuity and healing generational trauma.
	<i>Continuum</i> (overlaps <i>Inter-generational Knowledge Transfer</i> )	Broad label for ACI practices that adhere to records continuum principles such as collaborative reminiscence, multiple provenances, multiple epistemologies (including participatory methodology and other co-creator archiving scenarios), fluidity, and semantic stability.
	<i>Context</i> (stems from both foundational roots)	Minority/marginalized/Indigenous perspectives prioritized, asserted, and reclaimed to contextualizing narratives, information, and functions of CI work.
Non-traditional Conceptualization	<i>Justice</i>	Anti-colonial preservation practices, with the repository playing a part in the pursuit of justice for community members to meet their personal memory, identity, and accountability needs.
	<i>Intangibility</i> (overlaps <i>Impact</i> )	Cultural heritage, orality, dance, storytelling, performance, embodiment, and Indigenous ways of knowing.

**Table 1.** Archival community informatics functions applicable to revitalization lexicography

## Applying the archival community informatics framework to revitalization lexicography projects

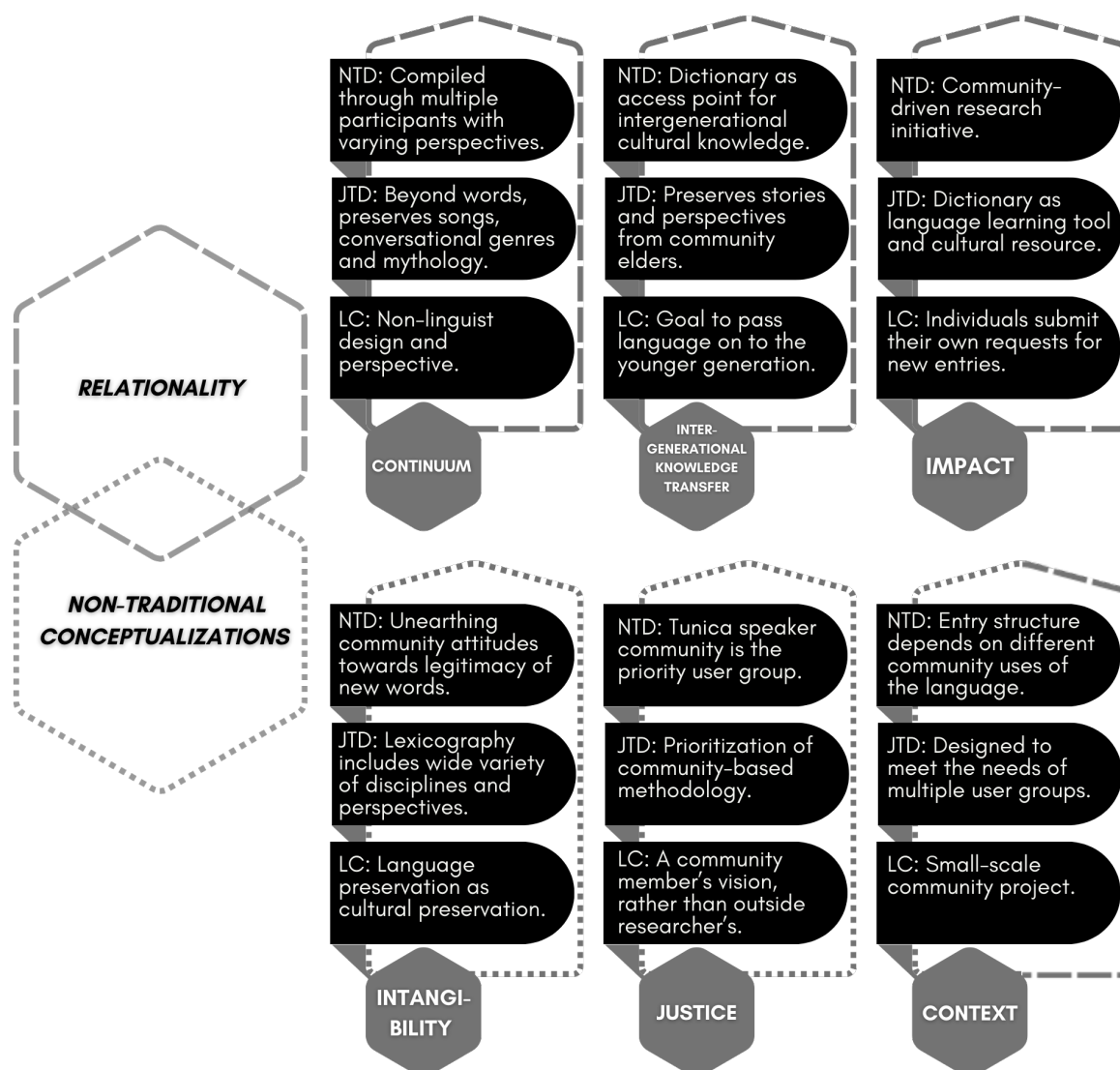
Just as community memory workers, archivists and archival scholars have worked to reconceptualize provenance to center the colonized rather than the colonizer, members of language communities and linguists are moving away from methodologies that serve academic researchers to ones that serve language and memory needs of ML communities. Three revitalization initiatives are described and then mapped onto the framework components. Chosen purposefully to illustrate the differences between projects, the individual initiatives vary in design, language community, and institutional capacity. However, they all center their language communities in their work.

The New Tunica Dictionary (NTD), under the umbrella of Patricia Anderson's involvement with the Tunica Language Project, is a community-driven research initiative affiliated with the Tunica Biloxi Tribe which prioritizes the preservation of the Tunica language spoken in Northeastern Louisiana and Southwestern Mississippi (Anderson, 2020). The Jejueo Talking Dictionary (JTD) is a collaborative digital resource designed for use in revitalization of the Jejueo language indigenous to the South Korean Jeju Island. Arguably the most comparable to a digital library or cultural heritage archive, JTD integrates '*existing annotated video corpora of Jejueo songs, conversational genres and regional mythology into a multimedia database*', and is positioned by its creator, linguist Moira Saltzman (2017), as a '*repository for oral history*' that will ideally be used in the context of Jejueo language acquisition (p. 122). Finally, the LearnCajun (LC) dictionary app is an independent community project started by Luke Romero, a non-linguist native of St. Martinville Parish and heritage speaker of Louisiana Regional French. Like many independent community archives that



do not always follow prescriptive archival practices, LC does not conform to traditional linguistic approaches and emphasizes the cultural heritage dimensions of the language.

Through a qualitative content analysis approach (Spurgin & Wildemuth, 2016), the research team analyzed each initiative's dictionary, website, and related documentation (including publications about the efforts) for presence of the framework concepts. Each project is uniquely built to serve the needs of its ML community. As such, they look and function in disparate ways. However, in analyzing their CI work, the research team was able to map aspects of each to the functions within the ACI Framework as can be seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Applications of the archival community informatics framework for revitalization lexicography concepts in NTD, JTD, and LC

## Discussion

Harris (2009) observed the 'many lenses available to archivists in their reading of archive [and that] lenses from outside archival discourses offer abundant riches' (p. 141). In ACI, working actively with (non-archivist) priority stakeholders can result in an ontological shift transforming archives from static document repositories to living embodiments of memory (Lee, 2016; Roeschley & Kim, 2019).

In revitalization lexicography, needs of ML community members can be prioritized through adherence to the archiving *continuum* principles of multiple epistemologies and participatory/community-based workflows. Saltzman (2017) has appealed to *continuum* concepts by including a very diverse and interdisciplinary group of experts in the Jejueo Talking Dictionary Project for a ‘repository for oral history’ (p. 122) to meet the needs of multiple user groups and operate as both a language learning tool and a cultural preservation resource.

There is often a clear intention for *intergenerational knowledge transfer* through both archival and lexicographic work (Wallace et. al, 2014; Saltzman, 2017; Dallwitz et al., 2023; Debenport et al., 2023). Saltzman (2017) observes that unlike with community-made cultural heritage materials in the dictionary, many members of the Jejueo language community are unmotivated to use materials designed for academic researchers. Similarly, while LearnCajun does not conform to all prescribed linguistic practices, it operates with total community autonomy and involves community elders in the creation of dictionary entries.

Context can hold a spectrum of (dis)empowering implications in the archival sphere (O’Toole, 2002; Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021). As seen in NTD, JTD, and LC projects, CI practices utilize context-based decision making -- rather than following one-size-fits-all prescriptive approaches -- resulting in dictionaries fulfilling multiple cultural heritage, linguistic, and information needs. Context also drives deep engagement with communities in the construction of both dictionaries and community archives. Thieberger (2015) notes that ‘*the greater depth of knowledge of a “speaker as lexicographer” will allow a dictionary to explore idiomatic and poetic uses of the language that may escape the outsider lexicographer*’ (p. 5, emphasis added), emphasizing that a dictionary’s usability for the language community is exponentially enhanced by prioritizing the language community narrative (as opposed to catering to linguists as the primary user group).

From an interdisciplinary perspective merging lexicography with archiving principles, the ‘*idiomatic and poetic uses*’ (Thieberger, 2015, p.5) could also be regarded as manifestations of a language community’s *intangible* cultural heritage with connections to Indigenous ways of knowing, orality, and embodiment described in archival literature (Sutherland, 2016; Kutay, 2019; Egan, 2022). Notions of *context*, *intangibility*, and *justice* emphasize the importance of the language community’s autonomy over what content is included/excluded, how it is formatted, and who is allowed access. A notable example from the NTD is the ongoing discussion gauging community attitudes towards the inclusion of new words (neologisms) in the dictionary (Anderson, 2020).

Archival and lexicographic rejections of traditional formulaic protocols, as well as investments in relationship building allow for *justice* and liberatory consequences—with a marked *impact* on the communities involved. Calls for an integration of critical theory in lexicographic and archival spheres examine the implications that (de)colonial epistemologies have on collaborative repository building (Leonard, 2017; McKemmish, 2019; Sear & Turin, 2021). In terms of *impact*, the creation of a dictionary, particularly for an under-resourced ML, necessarily involves lexicographers (community members or otherwise) taking stances on linguistic features, which can be polarizing to a language community. It is also significant to note the ways that identity feeds into the concept of *impact* in relation to community, dictionaries, and other memory work (MacNeil, 2018). As such, these manifestations of *impact* and *justice* directly tie back to Tsunoda’s (2006) observation that language reclamation efforts can positively enhance the language ideologies of a speaker community—working to transform imposed majority language prestige into connection with, and appreciation of ML heritage.

Revitalization lexicography is a direct answer to epistemic injustice. While a linguistic discipline, lexicography is also an archiving practice. Imposed supremacy values of majority language groups are preserved in dictionaries—as are cultural traditions of ML communities. While mapping the ACI framework to existing revitalization initiatives reveals common functions in the construction

of archives and dictionaries, further IS research on lexicography is needed. Future steps in this project include interviews and focus groups with revitalization lexicographers and ML community members to better understand their experiences, their information needs, and areas of interdisciplinary collaboration.

## Conclusion

Dictionaries preserve more than words—they embody cultural heritage and epistemic values. Like archives, they are selectively constructed to both amplify and silence. By embracing revitalization lexicography as a type of CI practice, IS and archival scholars have an opportunity to serve revitalization efforts through methodological support for heritage preservation workflows, information needs research, dictionary user support, and the many other functions of ML dictionaries. Continuing explorations into the ways archival functions operate in the domain of lexicography can result in transformative spaces for stewarding CI and language preservation.

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