

3 Linguistic Fieldwork among Speakers of Endangered Languages

Colette Grinevald

| | |
|---|----|
| 3.1. Introduction | 36 |
| 3.2. Working on endangered languages: linguistic description at the core | 38 |
| 3.2.1. Basic linguistic descriptive work | 39 |
| 3.2.2. Language documentation projects | 39 |
| 3.2.3. Preservation-revitalization projects | 40 |
| 3.2.4. Conclusion: multiple demands but language descriptions at the core | 41 |
| 3.3. Issues embedded in the complex situations of fieldwork on endangered languages | 42 |
| 3.3.1. Considering fieldwork in time line: past–present–future | 42 |
| 3.3.1.1. Past | 42 |
| 3.3.1.2. Present | 43 |
| 3.3.1.3. Future | 43 |
| 3.3.2. Dealing with loss | 44 |
| 3.3.2.1. Loss of natural context for language learning and participant observation | 44 |
| 3.3.2.2. Loss of a sense of norm, and increased variation in the language | 45 |
| 3.3.2.3. Loss of choice of speakers | 45 |
| 3.3.2.4. Loss of linguistic confidence of certain types of speakers | 45 |
| 3.3.2.5. Loss of speakers retold | 45 |
| 3.3.2.6. Loss of the speakers | 46 |
| 3.3.2.7. Conclusion: a pervasive sense of loss | 46 |
| 3.3.3. Dealing with language attitudes | 46 |
| 3.3.3.1. Helping revalorize the language and the speakers | 47 |
| 3.3.3.2. Dealing with normative attitudes of language activists | 47 |
| 3.3.3.3. Facing language ownership | 48 |
| 3.3.4. Conclusions: on the extra complications of fieldwork on endangered languages | 48 |
| 3.4. Working with speakers of endangered languages | 49 |

Colette Grinevald was previously Colette Craig. The title of this chapter was suggested to me by Nancy Dorian whom I wish to thank here for her generous sharing of ideas and materials, and whose pioneering work in the field of endangered languages, including its issues of fieldwork, I wish to acknowledge here. I also want to thank Roberto Zavala for all the brainstorming time and effort he invested in the production of the original version of this chapter. While I think of myself simply as a spokesperson for the fieldworker colleagues from various continents with whom I know I share the concerns expressed here (in particular North American, Latin American, European, and Australian colleagues on career tracks parallel to mine over the last decades), I am also sure others could have been more eloquent and I will therefore take full responsibility for the likely awkwardness and roughness of my own statements. What should be clear is that the issues raised here need to be integrated in any public debate on endangered languages in the interests of those who might consider joining in the work.

| | |
|---|----|
| 3.4.1. About speakers of endangered languages | 49 |
| 3.4.1.1. Typology of speakers of endangered languages | 49 |
| 3.4.1.2. About a typology in the first place | 50 |
| 3.4.1.3. Types of speakers | 50 |
| 3.4.1.4. Projected revisions to the typology | 52 |
| 3.4.2. Working with this great variety of speakers | 53 |
| 3.4.2.1. Counting the last speakers | 53 |
| 3.4.2.2. Evaluating speakers' knowledge of the endangered language | 53 |
| 3.4.2.3. Collecting data from speakers of endangered languages | 53 |
| 3.4.2.4. Conclusion: Adapting methodologies for data collection and analysis | 56 |
| 3.4.3. About linguists working on endangered languages | 57 |
| 3.4.3.1. A certain personality profile | 57 |
| 3.4.3.2. Energy, time commitment, and professional risk | 58 |
| 3.4.4. An invitation to take up the challenge | 59 |
| 3.4.4.1. A collective responsibility | 59 |
| 3.4.4.2. More about why we do it | 60 |
| 3.4.4.3. A last warning | 60 |
| 3.5. A case study of fieldwork on an endangered language | 60 |
| 3.5.1. The sociopolitical circumstances of the project | 60 |
| 3.5.1.1. Regional autonomy project and linguistic rights in time of war | 61 |
| 3.5.1.2. The Rama people and the Rama language | 61 |
| 3.5.2. The search for speakers | 61 |
| 3.5.2.1. Finding three Rama speakers to work on the Rama language | 62 |
| 3.5.2.2. The different skills of the three main consultants | 62 |
| 3.5.2.3. Looking for more speakers | 64 |
| 3.5.3. Trying to work with more Rama speakers | 65 |
| 3.5.3.1. Other native speakers that did not work out as language consultants | 65 |
| 3.5.3.2. Working at the margins: rememberers and semi-speakers | 67 |
| 3.5.3.3. Cycles of expectation and frustration | 68 |
| 3.5.3.4. Dealing with a major contradiction for the language revitalization part of the project | 69 |
| 3.5.4. Some figures: time, (wo)manpower, and grant support | 70 |
| 3.6. Conclusions | 71 |

3.1. Introduction

Beyond being convinced of the importance of documenting the diversity of the world's languages before it is too late, and beyond advocating the involvement of the linguistic scholarly community in the task, it is

important that we also address the various dimensions of the nature of the fieldwork enterprises for such a task. In the wake of a newly orchestrated dedication to carrying out linguistic work on endangered languages, it would seem essential to consider some of the specifics of fieldwork in such circumstances to be taken into account in the planning and carrying out of such field projects. The position taken here is that while linguistic fieldwork is never an easy task, it happens to become, more often than acknowledged, an especially complex endeavour in the particular case of fieldwork on endangered languages. By considering here some aspects of the fieldwork part of the enterprise, the hope is to contribute to what Fishman (1991) has called the need for "intellectualizing" the developing subfields of linguistics that concern themselves with endangered languages, from their documentation and description to their potential revitalization.

The focus here will therefore be on the relation of linguists to the practice of fieldwork on endangered languages, and in particular on some of the psychological, strategic, and methodological dimensions of such types of projects, highlighting certain aspects of the relation between linguists and speakers of endangered languages.

The chapter will consider some essentials of projects dealing with endangered languages, such as the fact that (1) field linguists working on endangered languages today often find themselves involved in field projects of wider scope than just the linguistic description they feel best prepared to handle; (2) the complexity of endangered language field situations means dealing with a multidimensional sense of loss, and diverse and strong language attitudes; and (3) working with the many types of speakers of endangered languages leads to a reconsideration of data-collecting methodologies seldom carried out in field methods courses of linguistics departments. The chapter will close with (4) a case study of such a project with the Rama language of Nicaragua, a Latin American country of the Pacific Rim (cf. Ch. 10, this volume), illustrating some of the major points raised earlier.

It might be worth underlining from the start that much of what will be made explicit here will most likely appear to be no more than common sense to many experienced fieldworkers familiar with this type of field situation and sensitive to their particularities. But it is assumed that, for readers of vital language communities unfamiliar with such situations and curious of them, articulating what some of this common sense consists of, and what it is meant to respond to, is worth putting down in writing.

49
49
50
50
52
53
53
53
53
56
57
57
58
59
59
60
60
60
61
61
61
62
62
64
65
65
67
68
69
70
71

diversity
ocating
sk, it is

3.2. Working on Endangered Languages: Linguistic Description at the Core

The field of "endangered languages" has seen a rapid expansion in recent years, and several major syntheses of general aspects of the issue have come out in the last few years (see for instance Grenoble and Whaley 1998; Crystal 2000; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Hagège 2000). Linguists have also started recounting their field experiences (see papers in Newman and Ratliff 2001 and Austin 2003, for instance) as part of a more or less concerted effort at reflecting on the nature of linguistic fieldwork, in particular fieldwork on endangered languages.¹

It is now fairly common for linguistic fieldworkers working on endangered languages to find themselves involved in a variety of types of projects in which the actual component of the linguistic description of the endangered language is considered as more or less central. As opposed to traditional fieldwork of the past century that by and large was concentrated on the single track enterprise of a linguistic description, today the enterprise of producing a mere linguistic description is often embedded into a wider scope project. And although some academic programmes are now gearing up to handle such challenges,² it remains that most field linguists today are more or less prepared to deal with, or embrace such wider scope projects.

This expansion of the scope of many fieldwork situations on endangered languages may actually be more pronounced and widespread in certain parts of the world than in others. It certainly is a common condition of field situations encountered today in the American continent, from its northern to its southern parts (including the Pacific Rim side of the continent, from Alaska and the west coast of Canada and the USA, down along the various Latin American states facing west, such as Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua,

¹ This chapter is one of a series of papers by the author on the theme of fieldwork on endangered languages, in the context of Latin America in particular. Craig (1993) was an early consideration of the ethical issues of such fieldwork, Grinevald (1998, 2000) an earlier discussion of the relation of foreign linguists to national and regional institutions and their linguists, as well as their own academic institutions, and Grinevald (2003a) was a brief treatment of the variety of speakers of endangered languages, with an introduction of the notions of fieldwork as an art (as per Wolcott 1995) and of fieldwork frameworks defined by the power relations established between field linguists and the community of speakers of those languages.

² Such as the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Academic Program of London started at SOAS in London in the autumn of 2003.

Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, all the way to Chile—Chs. 9–11 and 21–24, this volume).³

The point to be made here is that no matter what the expanded scope of most projects on endangered languages today, the linguists will always be the academic researchers primarily responsible for the analysis of the linguistic structure of those languages.

3.2.1. Basic Linguistic Descriptive Work

Basic linguistic descriptive projects are the kind of projects most familiar to field linguists and the ones most easily validated by the linguistic profession. They involve primarily work in synchronic linguistics which typically (ideally) deals with the triad: grammar + texts + dictionary (GTD). Since the linguistic description of the endangered languages will always have to be the most original contribution of the linguists, who are the only professionals trained for this work, this chapter will focus on this admittedly narrow scope but essential and unique contribution of the linguistic profession. It is from this narrower focus that a sketch of some of what there is to think about when doing fieldwork on endangered languages will be considered here. Such a choice of focus is mostly strategic and certainly does not mean to underestimate other goals; it is a reminder not to forget the challenges of basic linguistic fieldwork at the core of all projects.

3.2.2. Language Documentation Projects

For definitions of “language documentation”, see for instance Himmelman (1998) and Woodbury (2003). It would seem that the impetus for the development of this new type of field project stems as much from the increasing availability of new documenting and archiving technologies as from an increasing awareness of the rapid loss of much of the linguistic wealth of the world. The two are now thoroughly intertwined, with the technological part receiving perhaps more attention today than the human relations side of the enterprise considered here.

³ See Grinevald (1997) for an overview of the situation of language endangerment in South America, and the start of a discussion on the possible relations, in that part of the world, of foreign linguists to national linguists and institutions, and to language communities. See also Queixalos and Renault-Lescure (2000) for a thorough introduction to the situation of Amazonian languages today by country, in which Grinevald (2000) is an attempt at articulating the nature of the conflicting pressures put on fieldworkers by their academic ties on the one hand and their commitment to language communities on the other.

Today, the term "language documentation" seems to cover two conceptions of field projects, which may be distinguished by the scope of the enterprise and the relation that holds between language documentation and linguistic description. A narrower scope approach of description-for-documentation may take the form of an edited and annotated version of the field database which has been collected primarily for the production of the traditional triad grammar/texts/dictionary, while a wider scope approach of documentation-for-description means a radically expanded primary data collection, aided by the descriptive activity of linguists but essentially carried out by a multidisciplinary team of fieldworkers (linguists, anthropologists, ethno-botanists, musicologists, historians ...).⁴

The position taken here is that these two approaches should be viewed as successive cycles of a major process, one that naturally starts with an initial documentation that produces an initial description, this description becoming essential for a wider type of documentation, which itself allows for a more sophisticated and more comprehensive description, in ever widening and deepening cycles. Proposals of documentation projects need to be assessed on the basis of what is feasible for a particular situation at a particular time, a more encyclopedic documentation only conceivable on the strength of pre-existing extensive linguistic description, and long-term working relations of the linguist with (members of) the community that have active participation in the project.

3.2.3. Preservation-revitalization Projects

The third type of project in which field linguists working on endangered languages may find themselves involved today is language preservation and revitalization projects, which are, at best, generated and managed by the linguistic communities themselves. See for instance the collection of articles produced by two of the leading North American linguists involved with such projects, and pointedly entitled *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice* (Hinton and Hale 2001).⁵

⁴ Nothing will be said here of the newly developing field of archiving, but it is to be kept in full view as a complementary component of all documentation projects today.

⁵ Ken Hale, the MIT linguist who helped create summer linguistic institutes for speakers of indigenous languages and trained the first Native American speakers through Ph.D.s in linguistics, and Leanne Hinton, from the University of California at Berkeley, and her Master Apprentice Program for the native languages of California. For a sense of the diversity of ongoing language revitalization programmes in which linguists are involved, see for instance the SSILA newsletter.

As convincingly discussed by Gerdtts (1998) and clear from general work on endangered languages by Nettle and Romaine (2000) and Crystal (2000), the role of linguists in the overall dynamics of such projects may need humbling re-evaluation and readjustment, even though, and once again, one must keep in mind that the original and indispensable contribution of linguists remains the analytical study of the language. It may well be that, in such contexts, the most productive approach to the description of the language is one channelled through the training in descriptive linguistics of linguistic community members, for self-sustaining language work of the kind that can be of use to the community. This means that the field linguists double up as linguistics teachers, or are hired actually as full-time teachers and supervisors of linguistic work done by speakers themselves (the WITH and BY fieldwork frameworks mentioned below on p. 44 at n. 9).⁶

3.2.4. Conclusion: Multiple Demands but Language Descriptions at the Core

The main point of this first section was therefore that linguistic fieldwork on endangered languages may well be cast today within more encompassing documentation and revitalization projects, in which case one of the major challenges for the linguistic fieldworker is to manage a demanding balancing act between multiple demands. This issue has been vividly described by Nagy (2000), who describes her fieldwork experience as wearing different "hats", among which are the sociolinguist hat, the theoretical linguist hat, the applied linguist hat, and the "techie" hat, with others yet to be considered. This balancing act may well be in fact one of the major field issues to face for linguists working on endangered languages today.

⁶ See the example of Guatemala and the development of a cohort of Mayan native linguists, and the dedication of a field linguist like Nora England to the training of Guatemalan native Mayan linguists: this included contribution to the production of pedagogical material (England 1992*b*, 2001) and the creation of a native linguistic research institute, OKMA. See also Yasugi (2003) for ELPR-financed volumes of linguistic materials based on a questionnaire (that of the Archive of Indigenous Languages of Mexico organized by Swadesh) produced by the linguists of OKMA. The special case of linguistics in Guatemala is described in England (1992*a*, 1997) and Grinevald (2003*b*). The training effort has continued into the creation of CILLA (the Center for the Indigenous Languages of Latin America—N. England director), to provide graduate training for the likes of the indigenous graduates of university programmes in Latin America (for Mayan speakers, the programmes of CIESAS in Mexico, or of the Landivar and San Carlos Universities of Guatemala).

3.3. Issues Embedded in the Complex Situations of Fieldwork on Endangered Languages

Unlike other disciplines relying on fieldwork, such as anthropology, ethnology, or sociology, linguistics has not had a tradition of discussing much the phenomenon of fieldwork. What is generally lacking is an addition to the standard course on "field methods" with some discussion of the wider context of doing "fieldwork". This becomes crucial when one is heading for fieldwork in the midst of endangered language communities, with all the specific extra complications such projects may entail. Among the themes that could be raised in such fieldwork sessions, three will be considered below: the importance of grasping the dynamics of a fieldwork project in a time line, from past through the present to the future; understanding and anticipating having to deal with various forms of loss sometimes in unexpected and powerful ways; and the need to cope with the sometimes insidious impact of particular language attitudes on even the simplest linguistic elicitation sessions.

3.3.1. Considering Fieldwork in Time Line: Past–present–future

This is a basic issue to always take into consideration when doing fieldwork, but one that is not very familiar to linguists: to become aware of the community's past experience with linguistically oriented outsiders, of its present concerns and activities about the language, and to work for some possible continuation of the work in the future by the community itself or other outsiders on other projects.

3.3.1.1. *Past*

With respect to the past, the issue is that one may or may not be the first one in the field. Earlier on, when fieldwork was basically a very individual enterprise and field linguists were very scarce, basic attention to this issue consisted in checking whether another academic had already done or was still doing fieldwork at the same site.⁷ Today, it is best to assume that communities have already had experience with any number of development projects, including some dealing with the language in some fashion. The community's memory of our predecessor(s) has potentially either a positive or a negative

⁷ In the case of Latin America one factor considered in the choice of site was and remains to a great extent the established presence of missionary Bible translator linguists, for instance.

impact. It can actually take a while to figure out, as communities often do not share that information at first with new outsiders, particularly when negative feelings linger on.

3.3.1.2. *Present*

One needs to assess the level of vitality of the language, which is not a simple endeavour, if one considers all the variables judged important (as spelled out in UNESCO 2003). This includes evaluating the level of ethnic consciousness of the community and the level of politicization of its relation to the language. All field projects can benefit from such an assessment, to better evaluate the desirability and feasibility of description and documentation, as well as revitalization efforts. As will be seen below in § 3.4 on speakers of situations of endangered languages, defining the linguistic community of such languages and simply counting its members is already a challenge.

3.3.1.3. *Future*

In the case of work on endangered languages, it is important to consider how one may be the one and only, and, crucially, the last one to work on that particular language. If one is to be the one and last linguist to work on an endangered language, and one should always assume so, it means that the data one will be collecting may well be all that there will be of documentation of the language, unless some native people can be trained to continue collecting material after the departure of the field linguists. Therefore, as spelled out by Mithun (2001), a major issue to keep in mind in collecting data is that one cannot tell what will be of theoretical interest later in the field of linguistics, which means that one becomes accountable for collecting all the data one can, even data in which one may not be personally interested because of one's own theoretical leaning and interests.

A future perspective in terms of the community also means considering the sustainability of the work done on the language, through empowerment of members of the community, particularly in the form of continued training of speakers and semi-speakers capable and interested, and participation and support to the production of language materials, with a view to producing material that is actually usable in the field and by the community.⁸

⁸ This author can be critical of too much effort, energy, and funding being spent on the production of technologically highly sophisticated materials of no use at all to communities, in plain truth, for lack of access to electricity, or computers, or computers with the kind of memory capacities required by programmes first world academics have created, or simply for lack of able bodies to be trained locally in using them.

Such concerns are now integrated in ongoing discussions of what has been labelled as “good practice”, including legal, ethical, and practical issues in a sociopolitical context of support to sustainable community development.⁹

3.3.2. Dealing with Loss

Working on endangered languages has another dimension rarely mentioned in the literature: that it means dealing with ongoing loss. The notion of loss is pervasive in fieldwork on endangered languages, both in a practical and in a psychological, or even an emotional sense. The sense of loss may take many shapes, all with some impact on the experience of fieldwork. This makes the work essentially different from fieldwork in dominant language communities where language is everywhere, choice of speakers is wide open, participant observation is easy to come by, and attitude of speakers toward their language is one of relative confidence. There are losses that have to do with the language to be studied itself, and others that are more tied to the persons of the speakers.

3.3.2.1. *Loss of Natural Context for Language Learning and Participant Observation*

The loss of varieties of language due to the loss of contexts of use, which is the other side of the phenomenon of “language shift”, means fewer opportunities to capture the language in its various forms. It becomes from difficult, to impossible, to record certain varieties in their natural settings, since, by definition, fewer children are learning it—if any at all—fewer elders are passing on the traditional culture, fewer ceremonies are performed so that fewer traditional performing arts can be documented.

The loss of the critical mass of speakers necessary to maintain a vital linguistic community translates into less of a chance to observe the language in use, to hear it in its natural use, to learn it by immersion, to practise it. In general, there are fewer opportunities, often no more opportunities, for the last speakers to gather, certainly no more traditional night gatherings typical of winter nights in many places.

⁹ The notion of “good practice” corresponds to the “empowerment” framework discussed in Cameron et al. (1992), who summarized the progression of fieldwork frameworks in the course of the second half of the 20th century in the formula of fieldwork having been earlier *ON* a language, then later *ON* a language and *FOR* the community, to develop into fieldwork *ON* a language and *WITH* the community, where these frameworks are labelled the “ethical”, “advocacy”, and “empowerment” frameworks, respectively. Actually a further model of work *ON* a language but *BY* the community is the one requested by more and more indigenous communities today, in America at least, as discussed in Grinevald (2000, 2003a).

3.3.2.2. *Loss of a Sense of Norm, and Increased Variation in the Language*

These are losses typical of those situations that linguists can be very sensitive to. Normally oral tradition languages naturally function with a certain amount of variation that is already hard to handle for linguists, who come from normative language traditions and have been raised in linguistic traditions that primarily consider data of standardized long written tradition languages. But in the case of language obsolescence an additional layer of variation pervades everything: it is the variation caused by the lack of norm enforcement from lack of vitality of the speaker community.¹⁰

3.3.2.3. *Loss of Choice of Speakers*

The limitations are obvious when there are few speakers left, and among them older people with physical ailments, although the limitation in number is often compensated by the fact that some of those last speakers are extremely attached to their language, eager to work with a linguist, and excellent speakers. One can evoke for instance the talent of the extraordinary California Yahi man they called Ishi, the last survivor of his tribe and last speaker of his language, who was the unique source of a very rich documentation of his language and culture (Kroeber 1961). Working with as many of the last speakers as possible can help piece together what is left of the language and the knowledge it conveys. It has often been observed that what remains of knowledge of a language can be distributed across speakers, so that it might take working with multiple semi-speakers to complete the study of some aspect of the language.

3.3.2.4. *Loss of Linguistic Confidence of Certain Types of Speakers*

This is a major characteristic trait of the semi-speakers of very endangered languages, as will be considered below in the section on types of speakers of endangered languages. This type of loss has a direct impact on the conduct of elicitation sessions, as it becomes obvious that simple questions may trigger renewed sense of loss, of shame, or confusion in the speakers.

3.3.2.5. *Loss of Speakers Retold*

It is probably worth mentioning another aspect of the sense of loss likely to shock the unprepared fieldworker. It is the possible traumatic catharsis

¹⁰ For a discussion of the nature of the multidimensional linguistic variation inherent to such a situation of endangered languages, see Dorian (1982, 1986, 2001 in particular).