

## Encounters at the Brink: Linguistic Fieldwork among Speakers of Endangered Languages

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While the other presentations have amply discussed the wider context of language endangerment, considering issues of globalization, marginalization and attitudes, this presentation takes the problematic of endangered languages from another angle, that of the encounter, on the ground, of field linguists with endangered languages. The paper will ostensibly concentrate on basic issues of methodology for fieldwork on endangered languages, but will also address, more implicitly, some of the ethical issues involved in this kind of work.

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 becoming imperative that we openly address issues of methods and ethics pertaining to this line of work. This paper is an invitation to fully integrate the dimension of methods and ethics into the present effort at what Fishman called the need for "intellectualizing" this developing sub-field of linguistics, the one that seeks to attend to all aspects of the situation of endangered languages.

The position taken in this paper is that, while linguistic fieldwork is never an easy task, it happens to become an especially complex endeavor which calls for careful consideration in the particular case of fieldwork on endangered languages. This

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<sup>1</sup> Previously Colette Craig. The title of this paper 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 here Roberto Zavala for all the brainstorming time and effort he invested in its production. 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 will 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 interest of those who might be interested in joining in the work.

paper means to address the growing concern that, in the wake of enthusiasm and new dedication to carrying out linguistic work on endangered languages, lack of reflection on methodological and ethical issues could mean that much wasted or possibly harmful fieldwork be embarked on in a rush of illconceived field projects.

Much of what will be said here will most likely appear to be no more than common sense to many experienced fieldworkers who are familiar with this type of field situation and sensitive to its particularities. The main purpose of this paper will therefore be to articulate what some of this common sense consists of and what it is meant to respond to, for those unfamiliar with such situations and curious of them. I have chosen to develop three basic aspects of linguistic fieldwork on endangered languages. First is the fact that 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. Second, is the fact that the linguistic description of many endangered languages requires a data collecting methodology adapted to this particular type of field situations which is seldom the one in which linguists receive adequate training. Third is the fact that the field linguists ought to be prepared to deal with the common diversity of types of speakers that is characteristic of situations of endangered languages.

## **1. TYPES OF LINGUISTIC PROJECTS ON/FOR ENDANGERED LANGUAGES**

Before addressing specifically the issue of what data needs to be collected to produce a reliable description of an endangered language, the point to be made first is that this type of linguistic fieldwork may be cast today within a wide variety of settings, and that it may be part of a number of different types of language activities. The three types considered here will be labelled straight linguistic projects, documentation projects and language revitalization projects. Although it needs to be said right away that in real life those types of projects can often overlap and be intertwined, it is useful to understand their different nature, as they clearly put different pressures and constraints on the linguists. One way of distinguishing between these major types of projects is to consider the goal and the end product expected with each.

### ***1.1. 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). The choice of the term "ideally" is meant to evoke two kinds of imbalance in this line of work. One is the lopsided ratio of publication of the triad G/T/D, which has been calculated at 10/1/3 respectively. The other is connected to this first one of ratio that favors the grammars and comes from the reality of a doubly hierarchical reward system in academic linguistics. In the academic world, it is a fact that not only descriptive work is valued less than so-called theoretical work, but in addition, within the descriptive framework, dictionaries and text collections are much less valued than grammars.

As the linguistic description of the endangered languages will always have to be the most original contribution of the linguists, since they are the only professionals trained for this work, this paper will focus on this admittedly narrow scope but essential contribution of the linguistic profession. The choice of this narrow focus here is entirely strategic and does not mean to underestimate other goals. Because of my own long term experience with it, from both field and academic perspective, it just happens to be one viewpoint from which to talk about all there is to think about when doing fieldwork on endangered languages.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2. *Language documentation projects*

A new type of field projects is emerging today, that of "language documentation projects". It is an approach specifically being developed with the documentation of endangered languages in mind. Although major funding is becoming available for this type of project, much about this type of enterprise remains to be discussed and made more explicit. It would be useful for the general linguistic community and the funding agencies committed to promote and support this kind of projects, for example, to have a better understanding of the nature of the linguistic component of such projects, including the complexities of the kind of fieldwork involved. It could also be useful for linguistic fieldworkers, who have been traditionally trained for narrower scope linguistic projects, when they have received any training

<sup>2</sup> As should be clear from the reading of books such as Fishman 1991 and Nettle and Romaine 2000, a little humility in the overall usefulness of linguists may be called for. Because what linguists know how to do best, which is writing grammars and dictionaries, may not contribute to much more than the self perpetuation of the discipline of linguistics, and, when not handled appropriately, may even be more of a detriment than a help to the overall goal of language maintenance or revitalization by the community of speakers.

at all for it at that, in their effort to find their place in what are meant to be essentially multidisciplinary enterprises.

Language documentation as a new field of inquiry is the systematic documentation of linguistic practices, traditions and knowledge of speech communities, of much the same nature as the systematic collecting and documentation of other material aspects of the culture such as arts and crafts (Himmelman 1998). Today, the term "language documentation" seems to cover two conceptions of field projects, that may be distinguished by the scope of the enterprise, and the relation that holds between documentation and description: as either documentation for description, or as description for documentation.

Within the kind of descriptive framework mentioned earlier, language documentation is conceived, at least initially, in a narrow scope approach. "Documentation" may take the form of an edited and annotated version of the field database which have been collected primarily for the production of the traditional triad grammar/texts/dictionary. The wider scope approach to documentation is based, on the other hand, on a radically expanded primary data collection, which is aided by the descriptive activity of linguists but is essentially carried out by a multidisciplinary team of fieldworkers (linguists, anthropologists, ethno-botanists/musicologists/historians etc...). This approach seems to be the one that non-linguists in general, and foundations like the Volkswagen Foundation in particular, have in mind. It is worth noting in passing that it requires cross-disciplinary connections and networking which have not been traditionally facilitated by academic institutions and are not always easily embraced by linguists.

Rather than viewing these two approaches to the task of language documentation, one of narrow scope and the other of wider scope, it will actually be the position taken here that they should not be opposed, but rather be viewed as successive cycles of one major process. The process would start with an initial documentation which would produce an initial description, this description becoming essential for a wider type of documentation, which itself will allow for a more sophisticated and more comprehensive description, and so on. So that proposals of documentation projects should need to be assessed on the basis of what is feasible for a particular situation at a particular time: whether an initial primary documentation for basic linguistic description, or more encyclopedic documentation only conceivable on the strength of preexisting primary linguistic description.

### *1.3. Preservation-revitalization projects*

The third type of projects in which field linguists working on endangered lan-



languages may find themselves involved today are language preservation and revitalization projects, which are, at best, generated and managed by the linguistic communities themselves. As pointedly discussed by Gerds (1998), the role of linguists in the overall dynamics of such projects may need humbling reevaluation and readjustment, although, 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.

#### *1.4. Multiple demands but language descriptions at the core*

The point of this first section was that linguistic fieldwork on endangered languages may well be cast today within more encompassing projects of documentation and revitalization, 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": she herself mentions the sociolinguist hat, the theoretical linguist hat, the applied linguist hat and the techie hat, and there may be others yet. This balancing act is in fact one of the major field issues for linguists working on endangered languages today. Although it will not be taken up here, it clearly needs serious consideration, if nothing else because of the way it exacerbates the feeling of dissonance felt by fieldworkers caught between the pressures from academia and the pressures from the field. This sense of deep alienation that may build up in the process of the back and forth between the field and academia may in fact result, among other things, in the reality of much mental anguish, incompleting field projects and unwelcoming communities.

After getting a glimpse of this likely context of multiple demands on the fieldworker in the field, let us now return to the fundamental task for which linguists are responsible, which is that of the description of the endangered languages. The first aspect of this kind of fieldwork to be considered now is that of the specific demands of data collecting in situations of endangered languages.

## 2. COLLECTING DATA FOR THE DESCRIPTION OF ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

This paper concentrates on the "people" aspect of the work and will leave to others better suited for the task to articulate the issue of technology, for instance. Although a warning can just be given in passing: to think twice about uncontrolled enthusiasm for modern technologies which may be inappropriate for the field and which become more quickly obsolete and inoperable than one ever expected.

### 2.1. *Fieldwork on endangered languages in context*

It may be useful to first consider some general aspects of fieldwork on endangered languages before considering the actual techniques most appropriate for collecting data from speakers of such linguistic communities.

#### 2.1.1. Consider past and future

Here are some basic thoughts often overlooked but which can have a definite impact on the feasibility of a project:

- you may not be the first to work on the language, as other linguists or anthropologists, or missionaries may have already worked in that community. You may not know about them (you should inquire ahead of time and while there) but the community will certainly in some way hold you accountable for their behavior. This may account for some difficulty in meeting people and working with people.

In Bolivia in 1995, I was expelled from a community that had actually requested the presence of a linguist for a salvage linguistic project (of the last preincaic language of the Andean region of Bolivia: uru/uchhumatqu), and where I had started working. It happened because of some deep antagonism towards any foreigner that a particular member of the community could not overcome, in a community of 90 people where decisions are by consensus. There were then only two old fluent speakers left, a brother-sister couple, 85 and 87 years old. I was eventually told that the built up resentment had been exacerbated by the impromptu visit of a team of Japanese geneticists who had taken blood samples of the population a year or two before.

In Nicaragua in the late 80ies, I was sent to work with the Ramas without warning that a German anthropologist had worked with them a few years before, at the beginning of the Sandinista Revolution. One of the projects on which he had

worked, at the request of the community, was a dictionary. However, he had been expelled from the region for having involved himself in clearly anti-sandinista activities. This ultimately explained partly the negative attitude to the new Rama Language Project on the part of the men of the island of Rama Cay, his friends and allies. In addition, the publication in Germany a few years later of a very faulty dictionary ended up creating a profound sense of confusion in the mind of the Ramas about their language. The German fieldworker was only a master's degree student at the time he collected data and he had had apparently no linguistics training; he consequently failed at the most basic level of morphological analysis and produced a number of non-sense sentences and absurd translations. See Craig 1989 for a recount of this situation, and the extra work it took to deal with the factionism in the community reactivated by the confusion.

In French Guyana last year, a graduate student of mine having difficulty establishing rapport with speakers of Emerillon, the language to which she was assigned by a research institute, ended up weeks into fieldwork discovering that another French graduate student from another French university had been in the field the year before and had so thoroughly displeased the community that he had been asked to leave.

Being aware of previous work may also, on a more positive note, be extremely useful. It may work just the opposite way that doors open because one is considered to be the "sister" of a previous field linguist one may not even know in person but who left a good impression. It also can mean having some language material with which to start working and which can be useful at key times to trigger the memory of some rusty speakers.

While you may well discover that you were not the first one there, you must, at the same time, project yourself in the future and consider that:

- you may be the one and only, and the last one to work on the language. This means that what you collect is what there will be, unless you can train people to continue collecting material after you leave. Therefore, a major issue to keep in mind in collecting data is that you cannot tell what will be of theoretical interest later in the field of linguistics. This means that you are accountable for collecting all the data you can, even data in which you may not be personally interested because of your own theoretical leaning and interests. The back and forth between theory and description depends on this wide casting, and while a theoretical framework helps one 'see' what is in the language, one must also bear with collecting data of which one cannot make much sense at the time. A very

ficult predicament for some people.

- you may not be the last one to work on this language. Always consider how the community of speakers will treat the next comer partly on the basis of their impression of you; this is particularly crucial in the case of community of endangered languages, where the last speakers belong to an often fragilized and fragmented network of social relations, and exhibit complex speaker dynamics (to be mentioned later). The key factors are that there are very few speakers and that they may have multiple reasons not to want to participate that the linguists must be able to anticipate if not handle.

In all cases, it is crucial to consider how the data collected always need to be processed in such a way that future analysis will be possible, as linguistic understanding progresses and other linguists may take an interest in it. Processing data include transcribing it, and providing translation for it, the more detailed the better. Field linguists work with three levels of translation: free translation, literal translation and glossing, a morpheme-by-morpheme translation), the whole process necessitating the collaboration of speakers with certain linguistic talents.

#### 2.1.2. Working on endangered language means dealing with on-going loss

The notion of loss is pervasive in fieldwork on endangered languages, both in a practical and in a psychological or even emotional sense. The sense of loss takes many shapes, all with some impact on the experience of fieldwork:

- 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 less 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, less children are learning it-if any at all-,less elders are passing on the traditional culture, less ceremonies are performed so that less traditional performing arts can be documented.

- the loss of a 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 practice it. In addition, there is a loss of a sense of norm and an increased variation in the language typical of those situations. In general, there is less opportunities, often no more opportunities,

for the last speakers to gather, certainly no more traditional night gatherings (veillées typical of winter nights in many places). The overall lessening of the connections between speakers may even lead to a situation where the speakers themselves are not aware anymore of who else can still speak the language.

- the general loss of knowledge within each variety of speech is often a matter of partial knowledge being now distributed across speakers, so that it might take multiple speakers to reconstruct the full system. Such is commonly the case for instance with major oral traditions, such as the so called Adam's cycle of the Rama oral tradition of the Rama (Chibcha) of Nicaragua. Often disconnected chunks of episodes are told without apparent coherent narrative thread, although some dominant episodes may be reconstructed through the narratives of several speakers. Zavala (p.c.) also points to the interesting case of some grammar paradigms being still fully known today by only some speaker, who may happen to be a semi-speaker. All of this pointing to the imperative need to assemble data from a variety of speakers.

- another form of loss is the aging of the speakers and the eventual loss of speakers by death. The loss of memory that accompanies old age aggravates the common phenomenon of "language attrition" found with the last speakers of a language who have no opportunity to use the language. In addition, the loss of linguistic confidence very common among the semi-speakers is often an additional psychological stress to be factored in, both for the speakers and for the field linguists dealing with it.

## 2.2. *What needs doing: appropriate data collecting methods*

As mentioned earlier, fieldwork on endangered languages necessitates appropriate field methods, of the kind practically never taught in university linguistics field methods courses. Yet data collecting methods need to be rethought if the description of those languages is to have a reasonable level of reliability. Three aspects of the data collecting enterprise will be considered below:

- recreating settings for natural language use

Natural data basically means data that is not the product of translation. It may be spontaneously produced, or it may be produced on the basis of certain kinds of verbal, visual or manipulated stimuli. Although this requirement is not really specific to endangered languages, the realities of endangered languages is that

possibilities to collect natural data may have become so limited that it becomes an absolute necessity to think of how to create settings for natural language use. Particular care is required therefore in setting up contexts in which natural data will be produced, and appropriate techniques need to be developed to this end.

The basic practice is to bring speakers together in order to provide new opportunities for social gatherings and language interaction. This is much easier said than done actually in many extreme cases of language endangerment. It requires networking among speakers, organizing transportation of sometimes disabled people, and providing strategic support for the hosting party. But such gatherings may come to mean a lot to the speakers, while they reactivate their use of language, and (re)create links between isolated speakers. When doable, it is the most productive approach to (video)taping different kinds of language data.

In some circumstances, as in urban settings, the impossibility of physically gathering last speakers may be partly compensated by using some technology such as conference telephone calls and video links. If nothing else is available, one can also play back recordings of some speakers to others, although this will not necessarily work, as discussed below...

- getting samples of varieties of language use

The database for the primary grammatical description of the language should include various types of natural data. The most traditional type of data gathered consists of narratives of various kinds, traditional tales and personal narratives. What is being underlined here is that even those narrative texts should be collected in a natural setting, i.e. in the presence of another speaker, to control for the artificiality of talking to a machine.

Conversational material is of prime importance too, although it will require additional transcribing skills.

A more comprehensive documentation project will include instances of formal language such as the one used in religious ceremonies, and other performing circumstances (political or other speeches, community decision making gatherings etc), as well as studies of language acquisition. The proper transcriptions, glossing and translations of such additional data will necessitate that a basic understanding of the language, and preferably a primary linguistic description of it, be already available.



•dealing with speakers of endangered languages

Several circumstances make it so that it is not always immediately possible to collect even the most basic kind of language data from speakers of endangered languages.

For one thing there are few speakers with natural talents for analytical linguistic work available. It is worth reminding ourselves how, in any linguistic community, the percentage of speakers that are natural linguists is probably no higher than the percentage of gifted musicians or painters, and at that, must not pass a few percent. One knows for example how not everyone is a good story teller, in fact most of us simply are not, and how some of us have analytic minds and others not. So the chances are of course limited that the few speakers left with whom we can work happen to be some of those few naturally linguistically minded ones. This limitation is however mitigated by the fact that the last speakers of a language are also those that may have identified with it the most, and that may have been so naturally attached to it to have kept it alive. But basically, in situations of endangered languages, the last speakers are few by definition, and they are whoever they are, and there is not much choice to no choice for the field linguists of whom to work with.

Academics always suffer from some state of shock in their first contacts with the reality of speakers once in the field and away from the protected and artificial setting of university campuses and familiar urban environment. There they have to learn how natural language is indeed for communication and makes little sense outside of some pragmatic context that gives it sense, that the notions of exact repetition, translation and paradigms and of any other paralinguistic activity is not a given. In vital linguistics communities, the field linguists go in search of the natural linguists of the community and at best train them to cater to the linguists' planned activities.

But in situations of severely endangered languages, one needs to work with the speakers there are, and those are often older, less agile with the working languages used by the linguists, and less likely to become trained to respond to data collecting strategies developed for vital languages. Even good speakers may not be able to produce narratives, may never really learn to give an exact translation, and will forever ignore the value of a paradigmatic organization of knowledge.

Furthermore, one needs to develop ways of triggering the production of natural language beyond the strategy already mentioned of gathering speakers so they can talk to each other. In fact one usually needs to work with a variety of stimuli,

which can be visual, such as pictures or videos, or which can be manipulable objects to be handled in any number of ways, for sorting, commenting, describing to others.

Examples of such stimuli used in cross-linguistic research on specific linguistic traits are, for instance the Pear Story video of W. Chafe (University of California at Berkeley) that was meant to track discourse features, or the Chicken video of T. Givon (University of Oregon), that was meant to elicit serialization data, or the wordless Mercer Frog Story children books that has been used for to study of adult and children's narrative skills, in particular by teams supervised by D. Slobin (University of California at Berkeley). As fieldworkers know, when they are used in communities with no literacy tradition, those stimuli by and large do not produce the kind of data they are meant to elicit, but they can nevertheless be very productive in simply eliciting natural language material. It should not matter that speakers seem to often ignore the story line implicit in sequential arrangement of videos and books alike, and that they become much more involved in attending to what appeared to us to be peripheral information. Comments and discussions about the way of dressing of the protagonists, the kinds of flowers and animals portrayed, the time of day or season of year it might be all trigger the production of actual coherent sentences that are good data for a descriptive grammar of the language.

Beyond visual stimuli that are always likely to not produce the expected in illiterate communities, one can turn to the manipulation of objects as a trigger for the production of language. It is only with long standing familiarity with the language and the community, and excellent working relations with some of the speakers that one could expect to create appropriate stimuli for a particular type of data and collect reasonably reliable data. Some of the better known cases of the use of such stimuli, are the ones that have been developed by the researchers of the Language and Cognition Group of the Max Planck Institute of Nijmegen<sup>3</sup>, for instance, in particular those that were targeting the expression of spatial relations.

The point to be made here about how to collect data in situations of endangered languages is that the methods must be diversified, and that much of the effort must aim at triggering the production of natural sequences of language in the first place. This can be done by creating reasons to talk, like social gatherings, during which one can introduce shared activities, such as talking about still pictures, videos, or handling objects.

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<sup>3</sup> Previously known as the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group, S. Levinson, Director.

### 2.3. *Why does this need to be said*

Much of what was said above is actually, if one thinks about it, common sense. In fact if one takes the time to contemplate the essence of what the situations of endangered languages consist of, including having little choice of whom to work with, working with speakers that may be old, isolated, rusty and linguistically insecure, it should follow that we need to consider what the most appropriate methods are to collect reasonably reliable and ample data for an analysis, if we mean to describe the language as it really is.

But although it may be common sense, it needs to be said simply because it is not the most common way of carrying out data elicitation, by far, although it is hopefully clear that it would be the best way to secure reliable data. The ways in which the data collecting methods mentioned above differ from common practice today include the following:

- they call for working with as many different speakers as there are available, and collecting data with more built-in variation than most linguists (and linguistic frameworks) care to handle. For a discussion of the nature of the multidimensional linguistic variation inherent to such situation of endangered languages, see Dorian's work.

The main argument for working with as many speakers as possible is that knowledge of the language is fragmented and different speakers may preserve different aspects of the language. This is particularly true of the incomplete knowledge of semi-speakers.

- they limit to a minimum and secondary role the use of what is probably today the data collecting method most used in the field and most demonstrated in field methods courses in university campus setting, that of direct elicitation. Particularly unreliable is the method most used, that of direct translation, that of the linguist asking of the speaker: "how do you say X". The longer the X is, the most certain it is that the answer the speaker will feel obliged to give will be unreliable, unless a long working relation has been established and the speaker is a natural linguist who understands the task.

This method can in fact become particularly morally objectionable when used with linguistically insecure semi-speakers who are made to feel like failures. It is always objectionable in terms of reliability of data when imposed on neophytes lin-

guistic consultants from illiterate cultures. And it is only because they have done the adjustments necessary to survive in that dominant culture, including a testing approach to knowledge, that linguistic consultants of field methods courses on campuses may give the appearance of responding appropriately to direct elicitation. But there is no reason that such questioning should make any sense to a speaker in his own home environment; some can be trained to perform, if they are natural linguists, but most will never really be.

This is not to say that direct elicitation cannot be very useful, but only as a secondary method, at the service of analyzing naturally produced language material, and mostly as an exploration of the glossing process of naturally collected text. It must always be handled with great care, with controlled multiple checking and attention to non verbal information such as body language cues, and only with speakers with whom one has established a productive working relation.

- they put in question the validity of using already made questionnaires as field elicitation guides. This follows from the above, to the extent that they may be thought to be by some as guidelines for direct elicitation. There is something intrinsically inappropriate in approaching a new language, underscribed yet, through the grid of a questionnaire. It becomes particularly questionable when the language is an endangered language, of a region about which little is known, at worst when it is one of the many isolate languages still remaining to be described, such as many languages of South America.

Again, this is not to say that questionnaires are of no use, but that their use is limited. They make sense for instance when checking the particularities of a variant form of a language or group of languages for which there is already a solid linguistic knowledge. They can also make sense for organizing already collected and analyzed data, and for checking for gaps in data on basic grammatical topics which are of interest to other linguists interested in typological, areal or genetic issues. But it should be clear that questionnaires are incapable in essence of capturing the genius of a language and are no substitute for a reliable description of the language. In the case of endangered languages, they become very awkward tools that may be close to impossible to actually use with speakers and certainly cannot handle the nature of the phenomenon of language obsolescence that characterizes those situations.

- they also imply a basic work and time commitment that needs to be consid-

ered. This kind of field work takes time, and it does not produce publishable kinds of papers or books quickly. A reasonable estimate of the length of time it takes to build a basic database for a reliable description of an endangered language probably runs around three years, including months in the field and months of data processing and analysis.

It probably needs to be said here also how dangerous fieldwork on a very endangered language may be to the career development of a linguist, particularly graduate students and junior faculty, who are in fact the most likely to commit to it. There is no doubt that the work is time, money and energy demanding (thinking of fieldwork in the Amazon for instance), and that it is risky in many ways. Risky in the sense of the dissonance and alienation mentioned before, particularly in the case of linguists involved in major documentation or revitalization project. Risky in the sense of relations to the community being subject to quick turns, risky in the basic sense of not being able to collect much of the data base necessary for a thesis or a publication valued in promotion procedures due to the death of speakers or any other factor. Risky in the kind of data collected not providing the materials expected to enter the theoretical debate arena the way it is set up by linguists working on major vital languages. The academic community of linguists needs to consider those risks and see how to best minimize them to protect those that it sends to do the work.

•they also, essentially, and to say it bluntly, select for a certain personality profile of fieldworkers. Although the work on endangered languages in its totality requires all kinds of linguists, with all kinds of personality profiles, since there are many jobs to be done besides actual fieldwork such as advocacy and archive work, as well as linguistic training and supervising of student fieldworkers. And in addition, just in terms of fieldwork itself, the tasks go from data collecting to data processing and data analysis, and some may be good at all those aspects, but they are too few to expect such level of balanced competence of all fieldworkers. The best is most likely therefore to consider it as much as possible a matter of team effort, particularly when widescope documentation projects are conceived. The business of endangered languages should be seen as a collective effort, and particular linguists should be doing what they are best fit to do, so we get the best of all. There are too few of us and the job is too urgent and important, but we must be smart about how we fan ourselves out to deal with the enormity and multidimensionality of the task of linguistic description, documen-

tation and revitalization as best as we can.

In the profile of the kind of field linguist best suited for the kind of data collecting described above--the one that is needed for producing reliable description of endangered languages--is a main character trait to be pondered. It is connected to the fact that much of this approach to fieldwork relies on the ability of the linguist to accept not being in control of the situation, a lack of control which takes many forms. There is the usual lack of control of basic fieldwork, handled differently by each linguist, with subsequent multiple types of work relations. But there is, in the case of work on endangered languages, a much more pervasive lack of control, first of when, where and with whom one can work, and later of what one can do with the speakers with whom one works.

Last year a Colombian linguist returned to the Amazonian area where she had been working for several years with a particular .... group, and spent several weeks in the region without locating their exact whereabouts, returning to Bogota without having done any fieldwork.

Last year in French Guiana a French linguist could not go to the village where the language on which she was scheduled to work was spoken because of a suicide which had made it so that the village had been abandoned. The community was going through several weeks or months of mourning, so not fieldwork was possible.

The fieldwork on the Uru language mentioned above had to take place in the cultural center of the village and the linguist was not allowed to work just with the last two speakers and an interpreter (the working language was Aymara, unknown to the linguist who only spoke Spanish). The public sessions had to be managed by the head of the cultural committee, a weak semi speaker, in the presence of community members. The tape recordings made were confiscated when the project was aborted.

In addition, and as already mentioned when talking of the issue of data collecting, there is the additional challenge, once the linguist manages to be together with speakers, of controlling the process of data production. It is best to not think in terms of controlling that process but rather in terms of triggering it and capturing it. One must be patient, one must allow data to trickle in, and one must bear with data one does not know what to do with.

Because of the relation that holds between those speakers and the endangered languages to be considered in the next section, it is also not only ethically but strategi-



cally sound, as well, to be particularly aware of the balance of power between the parties, and to give to the speakers as much of a sense of control as possible. It is a matter of relinquishing control as a mark of some intrinsic respect for their knowledge of the language, as an invitation to become invested in the work in whichever way they want to or can, as conscious attention to keeping them as feeling as comfortable and successful as possible.

Relinquishing control is probably one of the most difficult constraints for academics to accept. First world academia tends to naturally select for, and then preferably promote, highly individualistic and self motivated free spirits. They function best within a world that values most highly the pursuit of "basic research" carried out within paradigms partly defined by a culturally-bound sense of efficiency and productivity. All of which can be counterproductive in endangered language field situations, and may well work against the production of reliable and comprehensive linguistic descriptions of those languages. (Much of the above has already been discussed in Grinevald 1997, 1998 and 2000.)

This is not meant in anyway to discourage linguists from contemplating doing work on endangered languages, only to provide some realistic insights as to the nature of the enterprise. The work is important and urgent, and it ought to be the business of all sectors of the profession. Those field linguists available, interested and willing to take on part of the daunting task of documenting as many endangered languages as possible before it is too late, need to be nurtured by the profession. They should be first adequately prepared and trained; then, while doing the work, they should be as well supported as possible--financially, psychologically, and academically-- and their place in academia should be assured so they can pursue this line of work. Unless we commit collectively to all those aspects of nurtureance we really have no business making much of a fuss about saving and documenting endangered languages.

I would therefore strongly encourage those engaged in such work to tell those interested in doing such work what sense of profound satisfaction and what occasional exhilaration obliterate all the moments of frustrations, confusion and heartache that are an inextricable part of the enterprise. We should all tell our future colleagues in this exciting career path how it feels to be opting to be a linguist in the real world, to deal with real languages and real people who can be so grateful and profoundly so proud to contribute to the salvage of their ancestral language. Some of those last speakers may have dreamed of it and may have hoped for it for a long time that they may indeed be extremely relieved to be given a chance to do it. Any fieldworker can vouch for that human dimension and say how it is priceless, and can communicate to anyone interested to hear about it its importance in amply

communicate to anyone interested to hear about it its importance in amply making up for all the headaches and heartaches spelled out in the previous sections of this paper. Although to be honest, one also needs to talk about how to handle the challenge of becoming a tight rope walker between the ivory tower of academia where the discipline of linguistics develops and the realities of the linguistic communities of endangered languages, which will be considered next.

### **3. WORKING WITH SPEAKERS OF ENDANGERED LANGUAGES**

In a situation of endangered languages, not only are there less and less speakers but, in addition, there are many different types of speakers of the kind that are not found in situations of full vitality of a language. And these speakers are characterized by particular traits which linguists must learn to take into account. It is the position of this paper that one should operate with a wide scope conception of what constitutes the linguistic community of an endangered language and that speakers that would appear to be at the margins of it should be included as much as possible in the process of the documentation and description of such languages. See Dorian (1982) for a statement of this position.

#### **3.1. Typology of speakers of endangered languages**

Speakers of a vital language normally present great diversity in their knowledge, attitude and talent for working on their language. Fieldlinguists know that some speakers can be superb linguistic consultants, while working with others can be difficult, sluggish and frustrating. The situation is always much more complex when dealing with speakers of endangered languages, both because of the inherent limitation of choice of speakers with whom to work that has already been mentioned, but, also, as this section intends to point out, because of the types of speakers one is likely to encounter in these situations. What follows is a quick consideration of the types of speakers of an endangered language speaker community and the ways in which this diversity relates to the process of data collecting.

Various attempts at building a typology of speakers of endangered language communities are available in the literature, such as Campbell and Muntzel (1989), Dorian (1981, 1989), Dressler (1978), Sasse (1992). Grinevald (1997) was an overview of this literature at that point. The intrinsic difficulty in establishing a workable typology of speakers resides in the nature of linguistic community, in particular in the effects of the progressive state of decay of the linguistic social networks and of the reduction of the domains of use of the language. the individual speakers represent as many specific cases of modes of language acquisition, of lan-

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guage maintenance with varying degrees of language attrition, all parameters with often unexpected twists.

Part of the difficulty in building a typology comes from deciding whether to approach the task from a linguistic competence perspective or from a language use perspective, i.e. how well does the speaker know the language, vs how often and regularly does (s)he still uses it. The approach taken here is one that attempts to categorize speakers first on the basis of their knowledge of the language, placing types of speakers on a continuum of increased bilingualism that eventually tips the balance from the ethnic language towards the socially dominant language. In some ways such an approach would not be very different from a study of language shift in immigrant communities. However, what makes the situation different in the case of endangered languages is the complex interlocking of multiple factors beyond the level of language competence of a particular speaker, such as his or her mode and extent of acquisition, length and type of exposure to the language, community and personal attitudes.

There seems to be a consensus that the major types of speakers includes a primary distinction of three levels of competence, those of fluent speakers, so-called semi-speakers, and terminal speakers.

• Fluent speakers

Among fluent speakers one needs to distinguish two subcategories, that have been labelled "old fluent speakers" and "young fluent speakers", although the labels may be confusing, since they do not appeal directly to the age of the speaker. "Old fluent" are the traditional speakers raised in that language alone, and most secure in it. "Young fluent" refers to bilinguals who are still fluent in the endangered language but speak it in a somewhat changed form. By the time a linguist arrives, the language may be so endangered that those speakers are in fact some of the older people of the community. Characteristically the new form of language spoken by these "young fluent" speakers is accepted by the community. As it turns out, discussions of standardization and revitalization often involve choosing between older and younger fluent forms of speech to be taught to the learners.

• Semi-speakers

The category of semi-speakers, prominent in Dorian's writing, is the category most emblematic of situations of endangered languages. It is a large category which includes all members of the community with appropriate receptive skills, but varying levels of productive skills. The category includes from semi-speakers

who can be fluent but whose changed forms of the language are considered mistakes, to weak semi speakers with a limited ability to produce speech, speech which tends to be made of mostly of frozen expressions. It is worth noting that it is from this generally larger semi-speakers group that some of the most involved activists of language revitalization emerge.

- Terminal and rememberers

Those are members of the linguistic community with very limited productive skills, but some passive knowledge. This very limited knowledge can either be the result of a very partial acquisition of the endangered language, with the effect of producing some form of substratum influence on the dominant language, or can be the result of an advanced level of language attrition on the part of once very good childhood speakers. Such speakers should not be overlooked either in fieldwork, particularly in efforts at gathering speakers, since they may gain back or reacquire some partial active use and can always help reconstitute a sense of community at organized gatherings. This is without saying how much deep satisfaction they may derive from the renewed contact with the language, provided they are not too psychologically scarred and scared about that language (such as in the case of survivors of massacres).

This terminology needs revision: as already noted, the use of the adjectives "old vs. young" fluent speakers can be misleading. In addition, the term semi-speaker is sometimes taken so literally that it seems to mostly evoke incompetent speakers, although the category explicitly includes fluent speakers, of the kind that is sometimes the main type of speakers readily available for much of the work. Finally, the term "terminal", as well as the term "language death", have been criticized as being politically incorrect.

Dressler (1978) had originally talked of:

- healthy speakers
- weaker speakers
- preterminal speakers
- better terminal speakers
- worse terminal speakers

while Campbell and Muntzel (1989) work with the following categories of speakers:

- S = strong, nearly fluent speakers
- I = imperfect but reasonably fluent speakers
- W = weak speakers

R = rememberers  
 which Sasse (1992) reorganizes as:  
 S = rusty speakers  
 I and W = semi-speakers  
 R = both from rusty speakers and of semi-speakers

Here is not the place to sort out this major problem of terminology and typology, but just to acknowledge the existence of a wide variety of speakers and to consider their interactions with field linguists in the building of a database for the description of an endangered language. Because the knowledge of the language may linger on in a fragmented way among the various types of speakers, it is important to consult as many speakers of as a many types as possible. Their contributions will be of different types too, but all are valuable, in terms of time depth, coverage of topics, levels of retention of certain aspects of the language, and eventually the study of the process of language degenerescence itself.

Some of what might happen with speakers of an endangered language in terms of the datacollecting process is concerned is the following:

- the nature of the social fabric of the linguistic community is such that it will take time to identify all the speakers, particularly the isolated ones and the ones who have not been claiming to be speakers.

- Most standard elicitation methods risk confronting semi-speakers with their limitations, resulting in psychologically difficult and even painful situations. This is an additional dimension of stress to not underestimate.

- There may be surprises in the evaluation of the knowledge of a speaker. Dynamics can be set off in such a way that renewed contact with the language may either reactivate some knowledge in case of attrition, or provide opportunities for new (re)acquisition by some semi-speakers.

- knowledge of the language being strongly identified with particular individuals, the common resistance of speakers of illiterate languages to work with language material of others will be exacerbated. Being able to use language material from some speakers with other speakers, either as a trigger for comments, or to ask for help with transcription and translation may take time.

- it may be difficult to record narratives, for a variety of reasons, one of them being possibly that there is no good story teller left among the better speakers.

It remains to be said of course that no two field situations of endangered languages are the same, and that the profile of the last speakers of an endangered language community can vary from one extreme to the other. But what is certain is that the feel of the linguistic community is very different from that of the linguistic community of the vital languages we university trained linguists have been used to.

### 3.2. Case study: speakers for a descriptive grammar of Rama (Nicaragua)

What follows is an illustration of the variety of speakers encountered in a language documentation project for a very endangered language. It is a telling case study that underlines the difficulty one can encounter in collecting data from any number of speakers, for any number of reasons.

Rama is an extremely endangered language of the Chibchan family still spoken by about 30 old and young fluent speakers on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. A documentation and revitalization project took place over a period of 10 years starting in 1984 in the context of the Sandinista Revolution that officially recognized all the indigenous languages of the country. Of the 25 speakers contacted, 12 could not be interviewed. Of the 13 interviewed, actual language data was recorded for 8, but in the end, the description of the language, produced 4 years into the project, in 1988, had to rely only on the speech of 2 speakers, one fluent semi-speaker and one young fluent speaker who was her daughter-in-law.

The wide variety of Rama speakers with whom the linguists team established contact is fairly typical of such a dire situation of language endangerment. What follows is an account of the type of speakers found. The first one was a fluent semi-speaker, in her late sixties at the beginning of the project. She was an excellent linguistic consultant and the clear Rama Language project leader (see Craig 1992). This was her third serious try at having the Rama language documented by outsiders in over ten years. She is the daughter of the last shaman who "talked to the tigers in the Tiger language" and had learned Rama at 10 when she went to live in the jungle with her father and step-mother, both monolingual Rama speakers. Although she could not produce narrative texts at first, she became more comfortable doing it with time and experience, while she regained higher fluency through the project.

The next main language consultant of the project was a young fluent speaker, daughter-in-law of this old fluent semi-speaker. She is the one who provided the



bulk of the narrative collection, including fragments of the main oral tradition of the Rama known as "the Adam cycle" and long and vivid personal narratives. Although she had more difficulty at first responding to the linguists' requests for repetition and translation, the descriptive grammar of the language was based principally on the rich language material she provided. Interestingly, her husband, who is also the old semi-speaker's son, and was first a low fluency semi-speaker turned out to be a motivated and good language learner. He improved to such language proficiency and acquired such sophistication with elicitation methods that he became an interviewer for some of the monolingual speakers at a later point. He was key in the project from the start as the boat captain providing transportation for speakers between jungle, island of Rama Cay and town of Bluefields, and as a leader for the jungle community of last speakers.

Two native speakers eager to participate in the project were recorded but their contributions could not be processed and did not become part of the database for the grammar. One was a young fluent speaker, sister and daily companion of the young fluent female speaker mentioned above, whose texts did not cohere. The other was an old monolingual man who had lived for decades isolated in the jungle and spoke what the others labelled "real Rama". He was considered to be the "best speaker" and agreed to taped interviews on the "old ways" and traditional place names led by the newly fluent male semispeaker mentioned above. The very animated taping sessions turned into such major social gatherings for Rama speakers who had not been together in a very long time that it seemed that those hours of recordings would constitute the core of the database. Unfortunately that was not the case, as they could never be transcribed either for reason that remain unclear to this day. None of the other speakers has been able to repeat what he had said, although his absolutely toothless speech and slurred style had not been an obstacle to intense social interaction, and communication seemed to happen from the laughing and questioning that is recorded.

Several native speakers in the old fluent speaker category were a part of some of the activities, but watched and never said anything, or so little so whispered or mumbled that the data was not usable. The brother of the old monolingual speaker enjoyed being there and smiled and laughed but said nothing, and a married couple of old fluent monolinguals looked consistently bewildered by questions and generally too apprehensive to be pressed, although they had agreed to be interviewed. Direct interaction with the linguists was not possible but even the coaching by the Rama semi-speaker interviewer did not help either.

Except for the first semi-speaker, the old woman leader of the project, all the

above mentioned speakers lived in the jungle, on the main land, while the bulk of the Rama community lives now on an island, where the language is practically lost. A search for speakers on the island revealed the presence of several "rememberers", once native and fluent speakers, decades before, who had been traumatized in hiding that knowledge of the language. One was an old woman who, as a teenager, had served as interpreter for her cousin, the old semi speaker head of the project, when she had gone to live with her father and step mother. at age ten This rememberer denied knowledge of the Rama language for years, although she became eager later to join in activities of the project; but she could not recover much fluency and died a few years into the project. Two young rememberers from Rama Cay, nieces of the leader of the project, also denied any knowledge for years. They had been victims of severe ostracism on the island that appeared to have traumatized them into extensive language attrition. They never agreed to join activities of the project.

There were also three men on the island of Rama Cay who were said to be speakers but to only speak it when drunk. Although they had participated some years before in a previous attempt at documenting the language led by a German male anthropologist (see 2.1.1), they had no contact with the project and their actual fluency could not be assessed.

This was a time of war, with government and anti-government allegiances, and refugees of the war on the other side of the border near by, in Costa Rica. A trip to Costa Rica allowed for contact with two more native speakers: one was the brother of the old woman leader of the project. He listened to taped messages from her but communication was difficult and he did not return for years, and when he did, went deep into the jungle. The other was his nephew, a young fluent speaker in his fifties. He was considered by the community of Rama speakers to be their "intellectual" and scholar and was the hope of the team of speakers for several years. They eagerly awaited his return from Costa Rica, where he was involved in political activities. He returned to Nicaragua too late to participate in the grammar project but was later the main consultant for the dictionary project that followed. He did not develop as much ease with grammar elicitation as the first semi-speaker, or text collecting proficiency as the female young fluent speaker, but he was best with dictionary information. He dreamed of taking some language apprentice with him to pass on to him the language he had learned mostly from his uncle, one on one, living with him in the jungle.

The revitalization project within which the grammar project was embedded also involved the participation of a number of terminal speakers on the island of Rama

Cay. They participated in some of the community Rama Language project, such as illustration of the dictionary and teaching of some Rama to the school children. with material produced by the project. Among them were the nurse of the clinic, the Moravian pastor, several school teachers, and some fishermen. There is no telling how many parents of the children taught some Rama in school for years were also rememberers.

What this rundown on participants in the Rama project does not tell are the cycles of excitement and frustration, tediousness and confusion, long hours and incredible bonding that are hidden behind such a listing of type of speakers. Somehow it is the interaction of all of those speakers that produced eventually a more or less accurate picture of the linguistic community of this very endangered language. The picture was quite different from that of the popular view outsiders had of that community, the belief being that there were just two or three old speakers left. It had in fact many more speakers than said, at least 32 identified, at different levels of fluency, including several old fluent speakers, several of whom were monolingual.

Howver, in the end, the fate of the language was sealed all the same because none of the monolingual speakers happened to have had children, and none of the children of the young fluent speakers are themselves good speakers or are likely to transmit the language. The good speakers were all from an isolated jungle community living in a scattered settlement along a creek, and were severely discriminated against by the much larger community of Ramas of the island of Rama Cay (several hundreds of them). Those had lost their language and were claiming it back, but were very resistant to learn back from the jungle Ramas they looked down upon as the "tiger people" who spoke the "tiger language".

Most of this complex field situation is common in such circumstances, but it is most important in closing to underline how both the production of the descriptive grammar of the language, and the apparent success of the larger Rama language revitalization project of which it was a part, are a tribute to the intelligence and the tenacity of one of them. Miss Nora, Leonora Rigby of her full name, is the real Rama language rescuer, a fluent semi-speaker with a vision and a natural talent of linguist (see Craig 1992b).

Finally a few figures can be given to outline some of the dimensions of the project, as this information seems to be hard to locate sometimes. The production of the Rama grammar took 6 field trips, about 10 months of actual fieldwork after an initial exploratory trip, and 3 years of steady work by a team of three linguists ((Grinevald)Craig, Tibbitts, Assadi) who combined skills in field work, data processing, and data analysis. Although the list of speakers did not do justice to the

level of involvement of the community of speakers, the enterprise was clearly cast into an "empowering fieldwork framework" with a clear ethical view of working On the language FOR and WITH the speakers. The circumstances of this project were described in Craig (1992a). Finally, its funding sources were a combination of large and small grant, from the National Science Foundation, Wenner-Grenn Foundation for Anthropological Research and the University of Oregon Research Funds, all of which required regular time and work investment in grant application, grant managing and grant reporting.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has concentrated on the data collecting issue for the description of endangered languages, taking into consideration three aspects of it in turn.

The first point was that linguistics fieldwork projects aiming at producing a description of an endangered language are more and more often now part of wider types of projects which themselves may largely overlap: those of documentation and of revitalization projects. Admittedly this particular view of the likely type of field situations linguists encounter today may be strongly biased by the author's experience with Native American situations of the Americas (North, Central and South), and may not apply as much to certain other parts of the world (yet). And although it was not developed here, the challenge of thinking through how to best support the fieldworkers who have to balance the often contradictory and pressing, and always time and energy consuming demands of both academia and the field remains to be fully considered.

The second point was that it will always remain the professional linguists' responsibility to produce an analytical study of the language. That is what the profession is about at heart and one must not lose sight of it, particularly once embarked in wider community projects. As mentioned, training speakers wherever and whenever possible should always be a priority, particularly to empower those speakers with native talents. It is fundamentally more ethical to share our knowledge with those who are interested in it, but if one needs to drum up other arguments, one can also say that it opens up the possibility of sustainable work, particularly in wider scope documentation projects. Such project are best conceived as genuinely collaborative project, best handled by members of the community at the ground level; such a set up can in particular provide opportunities to work with speakers that field linguists may not have access to. So it would appear to be an all around sound strategy. But it is unfortunately still too rarely embraced as the main approach, probably because it calls for a heavier time investment initially, and

it may appear at first to slow down the process of gathering data for a description of the language.

The second section emphasized the need to reconsider data collecting methods. This could be said of all linguistic projects in any case, and of all linguistic field situations, but such a reconsideration becomes crucial when dealing with endangered languages. If the database is to remain the main information on the language in the future, it needs to be as complete as possible, and if the description is to capture the genius of the language and to do so with reliable data, the task is to collect natural language data. But as stated, this is not so easily done with speakers of endangered languages, and a variety of methods were proposed: mainly those of creating gatherings of speakers and of using various types of stimuli. While all the above may sound like common sense not worth our time, it is obvious that it is not yet the practice of the majority of linguists, as evidenced by the type of data used in publications. Of course, these overall methodology is nothing new, but has rather been forgotten, as the task of linguistic fieldwork has passed from an anthropological tradition more attentive to such issues, to strictly linguistics circles dominated by a certain approach to theory building bent on the notions of native intuition and ideal speaker.

The last section addressed the issue of the wide variety of speakers of an endangered language community, and the need to consider them all for the different types of information they can provide on the language, whether linguistic or sociolinguistic. It noted some remaining awkwardness in the terminology in use, such as the terms old and young fluent speakers, semi-speakers and terminal speakers, and pointed to the intrinsic difficulty in establishing a typology because of the many variables to be handled to account for the uniqueness of each speaker. It called for great care in handling the pervasive condition of linguistic insecurity of the semi-speakers, for human reasons as much as for reliability of data concerns. The case study of one project of language description and revitalization served the purpose of seeing how some of the issues raised earlier in the paper played themselves out in a particular situation, as unique as all endangered field situation can be, but also as universal as they are in their complexity.

It is hoped that these notes on one of the many aspects of fieldwork on endangered languages will provide material for a necessary confrontation of our discipline with some of the realities of the work it wants to promote.

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