

Who pays the piper?

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Abstract

Linguists have been concerned with the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched community, aiming variously to carry out fieldwork *for* the researched community or fieldwork *by* the community. These concerns acknowledge that the researcher and the researched community may have different goals for the research process and that they may valorize different outputs. In this paper, we discuss some cases which demonstrate that, where communities have real control over the direction of research, they often make choices which are rather different from those which are made in situations where real control still rests with the researcher. Although many bodies funding research into endangered languages provide funds contingent on evidence of support from the community and of consultation with it, we suggest that such processes are often of limited value. They tend to ignore the reality that institutional and economic arrangements severely constrain the choices that are possible as to the direction of research and its outputs, at least in many cases. The effect of economic control remains very powerful: he who pays the piper calls the tune.

Some recent discussion on language documentation methodology has suggested that the current focus on technological solutions with its extensive use of computers should be considered a racist, or neo-colonialist approach which will deepen the gulf between the (first-world) researcher and the (third-world) community. Our consideration of the examples examined here suggests that there are aspects of the relationship with researched communities about which linguists should be concerned, although in our opinion the use of technology is not one of them. Rather we should be examining whether it is possible for us to move towards ways of working in which the different outputs desired by different parties will be possible without being forced into the choice between two attitudes to language data: "memorialization" and "regenerativity".

In recent times, fieldworkers in a variety of disciplines, including linguistics, have been concerned with the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched community. The influential analysis of Cameron et al (1993) made the case that fieldwork *for* the researched community was the minimum standard which could be considered ethically defensible. More recently, and also more specifically in the context of linguistics, Grinevald (2003) has suggested that fieldwork *by* the community is a better standard. These discussions acknowledge that the researcher and the researched community may have different goals for the research process and that they may valorize different outputs. But they tend to ignore the reality that institutional and economic arrangements severely constrain the choices that are possible as to the direction of research and its outputs, at least in many cases.

In what follows, we discuss some cases which demonstrate that, where communities have real control over the direction of research, they often make choices which are rather different from those which are made in situations where real control still rests with the

researcher. Although many bodies funding research into endangered languages provide funds contingent on the provision of evidence of support from the community and of consultation with it, we suggest that such processes are often of limited value. Collaborative research that involves speakers as colleagues in the project is an ideal way in which directions can be mutually agreed on, but is not always possible, for any of a number of reasons: the community may accept or tolerate the project but not be sufficiently interested to provide direction; divisions within the community or personality conflict between the researcher and community leaders make any decision-making difficult; they may not be used to the idea that an outsider would relinquish control. And beyond these obstacles is the powerful effect of economic control: he who pays the piper calls the tune.

A recent contribution to the discussion on language documentation methodology suggests that "focus on computer-based 'documentation' is akin to racism, or 'neo-colonialism', deepening the gulf between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'." (Aikhenvald 2007:7-8).

This observation led us to consider the nature of the linguistic enterprise, especially the situation of rich and educated members of the first world who conduct research in the third world. Our consideration of these issues suggests that there are matters about which linguists should be concerned (although the use of technology is not one of them in our opinion).

Economics and Control

Krauss (2007) offers some estimates of the cost of documenting an endangered language. He suggests that US\$500,000 is a plausible estimate of the cost of preparing a dictionary and a grammar of an un(der)described language, at least in the case of a scholar working on a language from a given family for the first time.¹ Such sums of money cannot in general be accessed by the speech communities of endangered languages, and we suspect that if such communities could access the money, they would not in general choose to spend it on supporting language documentation. (There are a few exceptions to this statement, which we discuss below.) Therefore the role of the linguist or researcher is crucial in accessing money, as is the prior decision by some funding agency or government to make money available for these activities. This situation does appear to give grounds for the accusation that language documentation is often a “colonialist” activity, at least when we consider models where control is located with external bodies and with researchers as their proxies.

Funding with outside control

The most common model for funding work on endangered languages is that of researchers seeking money from an organization, either government or non-government. A handful of organizations are able to offer large sums of money, for example the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Program (<http://www.hrelp.org>), the Dokumentation Bedrohte Sprache program (<http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES/>) and the US National Science Foundation/National Endowment for the Humanities Documenting Endangered Languages project (<http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/del.html>). Other organizations offer small grants, such as the Endangered Languages Fund (<http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/>) and of course the Foundation for Endangered Languages

(<http://www.ogmios.org>). These organizations generally expect that applicants for funding will provide some evidence of support for their plans from the community to be researched, and some commitment to consultation with the community.

We take here as an example the requirements set out in the material supplied by HRELP to potential applicants under their Endangered Languages Documentation Program. Firstly, there is a requirement that evidence of community support is provided: “A letter of support from the language community where you will work is required.” (Major Documentation Project Information Pack Version 6-07, p15). Despite this, the emphasis is clearly on outcomes which are valorized by the research community. The relevant webpage states that the outcome of a documentation project should be “accessible to and usable by members of the language community and the wider scientific community” (<http://www.hrelp.org/grants/apply/information/index.html>), but it also states that:

ELDP's objective is language documentation. Although documentation and revitalisation are linked, projects aimed only at revitalisation without significant emphasis on documentation will not be funded.

Nevertheless, applicants are encouraged to create documentation in ways that assist communities to maintain and strengthen their languages. This may increase the possibilities for combining ELDP funds with revitalisation funds from other sources.

Such guidelines in fact leave the researcher with limited scope for negotiating acceptable outcomes with the community.

Even within such a regime, such negotiation is not always possible or relevant. In Thieberger's fieldwork in Erakor village in Vanuatu, T began by visiting a family that he got to know while he was living there, and, over a period of a year or more, he learned the language and recorded some stories doing Wednesday morning fieldwork. Erakor village is particularly large with over a thousand residents, and is nominally governed at the local level by a council of unpaid elders. When T went back to the village to live as a PhD student he established new networks based largely around the (different) family with whom he lived. The village was too large for him to know everyone and so T visited people he knew and asked about good storytellers, slowly getting to know who was interested and who was not. While T never met someone who opposed what he was doing, he didn't feel that the project was anything but his own initiative, requiring him to set the direction and monitor whether the outcomes were going to be of use to the villagers. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre has a famous network of fieldworkers and the Erakor fieldworker became T's

¹ Krauss suggests that the cost could reasonably be expected to decline for the same scholar subsequently working on other related languages.

coworker, guiding him, introducing him to new people and transcribing tapes. Others in the village have taken an interest in his work and participated in several dictionary workshops T initiated but he was unable to inspire anyone to keep working on recording or dictionary creation.

Musgrave had a similar experience working in the village of Tulehu on Ambon Island, Maluku Province, Indonesia. During four periods of fieldwork (with a longest stay of approximately six weeks), M attempted to involve various respected figures in the community in language work, but with very limited success. Everybody was happy to provide information and to assist in teaching M the rudiments of their language, but it proved impossible to persuade community members that they would have to take control for themselves of any language maintenance activity. The low point in this experience was an interview M carried out with a senior figure in the community. A year before M first visited the village, some community members had organized a seminar to consider the future of their language, and this senior figure had written a contribution to that event, urging action to maintain the language, even including suggesting fining people for not using the language in public. But when interviewed, this same person turned out to be unwilling to use the language himself; the entire interview of ninety minutes was conducted in Indonesian, with the exception of a very few words.

The point we wish to make with this anecdotal evidence is that the idea of fieldwork *for* a community, let alone *by* a community, presupposes that at least some members of the community are willing to engage with the researchers in order to influence the research agenda. Our experiences suggest that this precondition is not always met (in apparent contrast to larger or better resourced speech communities as reported, for example by England 2007 or Grinevald 2003). When we look further at examples of situations where the community has actually been in control of the research process, we find it hard to avoid the conclusion that the constraints set by funding agencies on any negotiation between researchers and communities may be a factor in the lack of engagement by communities.

Funding under community control

Australian government funding specifically targeting language activity dates from the late 1980s. It was only after a concerted campaign by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous linguists that funds were provided to establish a national network of language centres controlled by Indigenous people. Prior to this time research had been conducted by linguists following their

own agenda and with varying degrees of benefit to the speakers of the languages involved in the research. It is instructive to see how the focus of work conducted by language centres can differ from that carried out by academics. Traditionally, university-based linguists have been concerned to record varying degrees of information in Indigenous languages in order either to investigate particular issues of interest to the field of linguistics or else to write a grammar of the language (or both). This work has resulted in most of the recorded material available for some languages. Part of the motivation for linguistic research is to broaden our general understanding of linguistic typology – what kinds of linguistic phenomena exist and how does this particular language manifest them or differ from the norm. As a result, linguists have limited their work to one exemplary language of a group, given that the group may all exhibit similar features and may be considered by the linguist to be dialects and thus not of great intrinsic value. For the speakers, on the other hand, the shibboleths that distinguish these varieties are the key to their separate identity and they do not understand how a linguist can ignore these critical features. Similarly, language centres have often been concerned to be equitable among the range of named languages represented in their target area, regardless of whether these named languages are, from a linguist's point of view, distinct languages or rather names of local groups who speak the same language.

Furthermore, the availability of funding spread evenly across the country has allowed language work to be undertaken where it was not previously considered. Language reintroduction and revival projects have helped focus on local identity and have resulted in the use of local terms and placenames in a number of parts of Australia. It is not uncommon for locally directed language activities to emphasise 'language affection' rather than linguistic outcomes such as fluency in a language (Thieberger 2004). Such 'language affection' may be manifested by production of books, CDs or other material for which single words or sentences are all that is presented. For the linguist these are thin and unsatisfying, but for those who produce them they are clearly affirming. Perhaps they are also the necessary first steps that may encourage their creators to pursue a more in-depth study of the language. As England (2007) notes for the Mayas with whom she works, their initial interest in language is centered around language revitalization or education, but that some go on to more advanced studies, "intrigued by the intellectual exercise of doing linguistics." (2007:107)

There are also several examples from North America of the different level of engagement and different choices made when communities have some control of funding. One example is the intensive effort which has been put

into the development of language teaching programs at various locations in the USA and Canada². The communities involved in these efforts obviously see attempting to increase the number of speakers of their languages as their first priority. Linguists are closely involved in these efforts, but primarily as sources of expert knowledge; any research outcome which the linguist may achieve is a secondary benefit. Another example is the use being made of the proceeds of tribally controlled gaming operations on the Coeur d'Alene reservation in Idaho, USA. These funds, combined with a grant from the US Department of Agriculture Rural Utilities Service, have been used to set up a free broadband WiFi network to which all tribal members have access. One explicit aim of this project is to make available material for teaching the tribal language (Graychase 2005).

We suggest that the important common factor in such examples is the degree of control which communities can exercise, not the source of funds. Aboriginal Language Centres in Australia rely on government funding and therefore on government policy, but are typically run by an indigenous management committee (see Sharp and Thieberger 2001) which may be as riven by sectional interests as any management committee can be and which may also have little sympathy with the aims of linguistic researchers. Indeed some Language Centres now oppose new research in their areas, despite there being no formal structure that provides them with any authority to stop research, and even in the face of a local community's expressed wish to work with a particular researcher. This desire to stop research may have been provoked by bad behaviour by linguists in the area, or be motivated by appeal to traditional control of knowledge (e.g., Newry and Palmer 2003) or it may simply be an exercise of power in one of the few domains in which the group can exert their power. To date, in the Australian context, the archival records that are being used to reintroduce language, songs and other cultural material have largely been the result of earlier research by linguists, musicologists and researchers from associated disciplines. It would be unfortunate if there were no possibility of recording current speakers in order to provide those records for posterity. We would hope that negotiation could lead to a mutually beneficial research relationship including training of local researchers to do their own recording so that there will be good records available for future generations.

² See for example the extensive list of programs in the Indigenous Languages and Technology mailing list (<http://listserv.arizona.edu/cgi-bin/wa?LIST=ILAT>)

The degree of autonomy exercised by Language Centres is constrained to some extent by government policy, but there is nevertheless wide scope for a range of activities, including basic research and recording of local languages. On the other hand, in some Language Centres older research is reproduced without necessarily adding any value to it. Similarly, as noted earlier, products with little language content are seen as suitable outputs because they promote identity with local languages and because they build on what little may still be known in an area where the impact of settler society has been the strongest and so the indigenous language ceased to be spoken as an everyday medium of communication some time ago. For example, Aird (1996) includes chapters titled "They were forbidden to teach us," "Why I never learned any languages," "We still have our memories," and "Do you know any words?".

Government policy can be a two-edged sword: consider the situation of indigenous languages of Taiwan³. Since 1990 in Taiwan there has been a reversal of the earlier policy of linguistic assimilation to Mandarin Chinese. Measures to support indigenous languages were progressively introduced during the 1990s and now there are considerable resources devoted to support for thirteen indigenous languages, including teaching them in primary schools since 1995. However, eight indigenous languages have not yet made it on to the official government list of thirteen tribes (four of which were only listed within the past seven years). It seems that linguistic definitions of what constitutes the 'same' language, based on criteria such as mutual intelligibility or structural similarity, may have serious repercussions for policy and funding. It is instructive to contrast this with the attitude to different varieties described for the Australian cases above.

What should linguists worry about (and not worry about)?

Limited impact

We suspect that it is easy to exaggerate the impact which linguists have in their research sites. In a small village their presence may be potentially disruptive, but in comparison to a logging or mining company we are neither harming nor providing a huge windfall for the village. We are asking people to sit and talk with us, or to take us to significant places, identify plants and

³ Information about Taiwan comes from Huang 2007.

animals and their uses. It is true that we are acting as agents of the first world and must realize that the information we record may end up being misused (e.g., a pharmaceutical company may learn of a plant's properties from our work). Such possibilities are one reason why some communities refuse to allow researchers in, or want to tightly control access to the research materials.

We must also be aware of the possibility that our work *qua* linguist will have impacts in the community. The constraints which are inevitable in even the best-funded and best-organized projects mean that language documentation will in many cases have the effect of privileging some varieties of a language over others. However, such effects may well occur in any case where a language has a dwindling pool of speakers, and the benefit of recording at least one variety of a language can reasonably be considered to outweigh the danger of this possibility. There is also the possibility that linguistic research will fix certain productions (e.g. stories) and that some aspects of linguistic behaviour will be reified. Again, we maintain that such effects are outweighed by the importance of making a record.

Difficulties of working under community control

We have mentioned previously examples from both Australia and from North America of linguistic work which has been carried out under community direction. In many cases, such projects have proceeded smoothly. But it would be naïve not to acknowledge that this way of working can be difficult for linguists, as recounted by, for example, Wilkins (1992) and Stebbins (2003). At least two points stand out in these accounts. Firstly, both Wilkins and Stebbins found that the communities with which they worked treated time differently to its treatment by Western academic institutions. Wilkins was unable to continue with the PhD scholarship which he held at the start of his research because the progress required by the administering authority was not attainable while his work was community-directed. And Stebbins reports some frustration over the amount of time which the community took to decide whether her project could proceed or not. Secondly, in these cases we can see how the outputs of research need to be negotiated when the researcher's values are not primary. In Wilkins's experience, he expected only that he would be using some of his material to fashion a thesis, but it was not clear to him what form that might take until relatively late in the process. But that was very clearly his problem in the community-directed paradigm: the outputs which the community asked him to produce were the subject of ongoing negotiation and were of primary importance. Stebbins began with a clearer idea of the type of output which would be needed for her academic purposes, but nevertheless had to frame the

project so that the output would also be seen as desirable by the community and would therefore be approved by them.

Memorialization v. regenerativity

Moore (2006) makes a useful distinction between what he terms 'memorialization' and 'regenerativity'. The first of these terms is characterized by Moore "as an orientation to the beauty of linguistic (grammatical) structures - compare Saussurean *langue*", while he characterizes the second "as an orientation to the representation (however inadequate) in writing of instances of language use - compare Saussurean *parole*." For Moore, this dichotomy is reflected in the attitudes of different groups to archived language materials. He argues that the academic institutions and discourse associated with language endangerment tends to take the perspective of memorialization, whilst communities associated with endangered languages take a perspective of regenerativity.

But from another viewpoint, Moore's dichotomy is secondary. In his paper, Moore has an extensive discussion of how different people are exploiting a particular archival resource, and he shows that there is a distinction between the aims and results of the two groups of workers. But this difference is only evident when the existence of the language resource is presupposed. It is by no means clear from Moore's discussion that the techniques to be used in assembling data have been or should be different depending on the use to which the data will be put. We note also that it has been a central tenet of the language documentation movement (since Himmelmann 1998) that documentary materials should be available for multiple uses. The development of new technological means for storage, dissemination and reuse of linguistic material provides for novel means of both memorialization and regenerativity.

While we disagree that the use of technology necessarily and in itself is 'neo-colonialist' (Aikhenvald 2007), we recognize that researchers having access to small 'have-not' communities is to some extent facilitated by the disparity in wealth between those communities and ourselves, as recipients of grants and (comparatively) substantial salaries. It is peculiar to pretend that one aspect (technology) of this enterprise is 'neo-colonial' (and we also fail to see how it is racist) while the rest is somehow politically neutral or benign.⁴

⁴ We could extend Aikhenvald's argument in a *reductio ad absurdum* and point out that using a pencil and paper in a pre-

Ken Hale noted this correlation of linguistic fieldwork with neo-colonialism when he stated that, “anthropology and anthropological linguistics became disciplines in which Westerners studied, published, and built teaching and research careers around the cultural and linguistic wealth of non-Western peoples.” (Hale 1972:384) He suggests that this could be mitigated by training speakers to conduct research into their own languages.

Aikhenvald (2007) confuses the use of digital tools for fieldwork with the provision of access to data via websites and multimedia – a common misapprehension. In fact, inasmuch as using the best possible means of recording and archiving recorded material assists the people we are working with, appropriate technology assists us in acting responsibly to the people we work with as first-world linguists (cf. Thieberger and Musgrave 2007). In Vanuatu, Thieberger was able to respond to villagers’ requests to create audio CDs with selected tracks of stories told by old people he had recorded over the course of a decade. These CDs were easily made as the data was indexed and described sufficiently to locate it and to provide cover notes identifying what was on the CD. Similarly, well-structured digital data allows various kinds of outputs to be created relatively efficiently in comparison to the days of analog tapes and spiral bound notebooks.

Funding bodies are becoming more concerned that outputs of linguistic research be properly curated in the long term, and we will see an increase in the use of appropriate technological tools that produce the kind of data that will survive into the future. One of the benefits of having a linguist work with one’s language is that they are professionally interested in language, have the time and the means to focus on its analysis and will (if they behave responsibly and train themselves in new techniques) create good records. As there is typically little or nothing recorded of most minority languages this work is vitally important in validating local knowledge which otherwise only circulates orally and is, in many cases, threatened by encroaching metropolitan languages and associated media (especially television).

We would therefore suggest that Moore’s dichotomy does not undermine the central thrust of documentary linguistics, which we take to be an endeavour aimed at creating high-quality and persisting records of the linguistic behaviour of specific communities. Moore’s

own analysis can be read in support of this position, with his lengthy discussion of the work of John Peabody Harrington (Walsh 1976) which demonstrates the primacy of archival materials that can be exploited in multiple ways by multiple user groups.

But it is at the level of funding decisions that we believe that Moore’s dichotomy is particularly relevant. The focus on endangered languages by funding bodies is a welcome and necessary move, but one that has certain unfortunate corollaries, not least of which is the attempt to portray languages as ‘endangered’ in order to qualify for funding. Having leapt that hurdle there are then potential issues with funding for related work, such as: taking archival materials (e.g., existing recordings / images / texts etc.) back to the source communities while there are still people who provide information about them; creating accessible versions of archival materials to assist in relearning traditional knowledge, including language; providing analyses based on archival material (e.g., a grammar of a set of texts) rather than on primary fieldwork. Each of these has the potential to support language in use in a community but is unlikely to be funded under current major funding programs. The emphasis at this level is on a ‘memorializing’ perspective, not a regenerative one.

The stringent requirements of the funding body can result in particularly poor outcomes. For example, in one case a researcher applied for funding to digitise material held by a museum in order both to analyse it and to return it with new annotations to the community it came from. The funding body required that copies of the material be deposited with them but the museum would not allow copies to be further distributed, so the funding was not made available, resulting in frustration for the researcher and the lack of ‘value-adding’ that would have resulted from their work for the museum. A little flexibility on the part of both the funding body and the museum could have resulted in positive outcomes for all concerned.

(Re-)engaging communities

The examples discussed above of different types of language work and of different attitudes to it suggest that we linguists need to be more creative in mediating between the requirements of the funding agency and those of the people we work with. To date, such mediation has been most successful in cases where the researched community exercised some degree of control over funding decisions; if, indeed, ‘mediation’ is the right word for the role of the linguist in such situations. But the economic reality is that major sources of funds are unlikely to be made available in that way. Where funds are controlled by a community and are not

specifically tied to language work we know of few cases where the community chooses language work over competing demands – the example of the Coeur d’Alene project mentioned previously is, as far as we know, an isolated example. And provision of funds by government is always going to be limited. Firstly, only a handful of nations have both the necessary economic resources and a sizable Indigenous community. Unfortunately, many endangered languages are spoken outside of such nations. And secondly, even in those nations, such sources of funding are always precarious. Recent experience in Australia at least makes it very clear that Indigenous issues do not sway many votes. Therefore we suggest that the area in which linguists can most effectively take action is in trying to find ways to make the activities supported by major agencies as relevant as possible to communities.

We would like to emphasise two areas. Firstly, we believe that the community of linguists could be encouraging funding bodies to support training of speakers of ILs to conduct their own research and to participate as collaborators in linguistic research. The benefits of such an approach are clear and have been stated by various authors (Grinevald 2003, Hale 2001, Woodbury and England 2004). In terms of our discussion here, we welcome the possibility of more direct communication between funding agency and community which should be possible when the researcher applying for funds is herself a member of the researched community. We are particularly encouraged by the efforts described by Florey and Himmelmann (2007), where important training workshops in Indonesia have been carried out with funding from major agencies (HRELP and DoBeS). We noted earlier that one factor in hindering effective communication between a researcher and a community might be that the community would have trouble understanding that an outsider, perceived as powerful, would want to give up control of their research. We suggest that activities which transfer skills and capacity to community members have an important symbolic effect which can improve the engagement of the community in the research process.

Secondly, we suggest that linguists should be prepared to devote more time to making it clear to communities how the outputs of research can be used for ‘regenerativity’. This is the aspect of linguistic material which is valued by communities, as evidenced by the importance which it assumes when communities do control the research, and as demonstrated by Moore (2006) in his discussion of the uses being made of the Harrington archive. This would therefore seem to be the obvious level at which to encourage a community’s interest in language research. We should enter a community equipped with good examples of materials

which have been created in other projects. We should seek out community members who have a pre-existing interest in language or language-related matters, for example teachers and those interested in local history and culture, and we should attempt to have such people guide the process of preparing materials for use in the community. Such activities may need to be juggled within the constraints of the funding on which we rely, but they may be the best chance which linguists have to build serious engagement by the community with any form of language work.

Conclusion

To quote Ken Hale once more, a postcolonial linguistics “will be measured by the extent to which work on the language is integrated in a meaningful way into the life of the community of people who speak it.” (Hale 2001:100). In the recent past it has become unacceptable for researchers to work in indigenous settings without having approval from the relevant local authority. In this paper we have discussed several issues that may affect language recording projects, noting that while a collaborative approach to this work is ideal, it may not work if it is initiated from outside the local community and the speakers have no interest in it, or if the community is concerned with more immediate issues that take precedence over language documentation.

We have also noted the differences in approach and outcome which seem to correlate with differences in the locus of economic control. Where such control rests with an external funding body, mediated via the researcher, we note a tendency for research to adopt a ‘memorializing’ approach. But where control rests with the community, the approach is likely to be directed more towards ‘regenerativity’. Although we believe that the basic aims of language documentation are neutral between these two approaches, we do suggest that relations between researchers and communities can benefit from an increased concern with the second approach.

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