Documentation and Responsibility

1 Introduction: Fieldwork with Endangered Languages

Any researcher who leaves a record of his or her work assumes a number of responsibilities, chief among them responsibility for the record’s accuracy. But when an endangered speech form is involved, as in the chief case I will discuss here, what might be called the ‘last-chance’ responsibility comes strongly into play: right now may be the one and only chance to create a record of the speech form in question, and right or wrong, what the late-stage fieldworker puts on the record is likely to stand.

A number of difficulties, some of them more immediately obvious than others, may lie in the way of a researcher who appears at a late stage in the history of a receding language, hoping and intending to leave a reliable linguistic record. If all of the remaining speakers are elderly, it may be that neither the current researcher nor future researchers will have an opportunity to gather additional material for confirmation or refutation of the original record. This is unfortunately a very common circumstance in research with at-risk languages. If the sampling procedure used by the researcher is inadvertently skewed in some fashion, a source who is unrepresentative of the speech community may come to represent the community in the official record of that community’s speech. This happened, for example, with the record for Golspie village in the five-volume Survey of the Gaelic Dialects of Scotland (Ó Dochartaigh 1997), where an overly literate man served as the sole source for the village, supplying written-language substitutes for some local dialect forms (see Dorian 2010, Chapter 9). If the local language is no longer used in ordinary conversation, the researcher may feel obliged to question the naturalness or completeness of such speech as can be retrieved for the record. Haas raised these questions in her work with the last speaker of Tunica, a man who had had no fluent conversation partners for many years, even though he himself appeared to represent a high degree of fluency (Haas 1941). If there are no longer any speakers who know how the language was used in connection with certain traditional practices, it may be impossible to gain a sense of the full semantic range of certain lexical items or expressions. Jocks (1998) describes the dimensions of the semantic-range problem particularly well, coming to it as an adult learner of Mohawk. If the speech community tolerates, or even embraces, a considerable amount of familial or idiosyncratic variation in the ways that Collins (1998) describes for Tolowa and Kroskrity (2002) for Western Mono, the researcher
may unknowingly take the forms he has recorded to be much more generally representative of a local speech form than they actually are. It should of course be acknowledged that misapprehending some aspects of the data and failing to appreciate the full semantic content of some of the recorded material are not problems unique to working with receding languages. But these problems are heightened in late-stage fieldwork, because of limited opportunity to supplement or correct the record.

Impetus for receding-language fieldwork may come entirely from the outside, with researchers arriving to look for languages reported still to survive, as with David Bradley’s quest for remaining speakers of Ugong in Thailand (Bradley 1989), or it may arise from speakers’ own concern for the future of their speech form, as was true for Faetar in Italy (Nagy 2000) and for Rama in Nicaragua (Grinevald 2006). In the latter case sources are readily identifiable, but in the former case the researcher may have to hunt for elusive speakers. In particularly favorable cases the researcher may find speakers who have developed their own sense of mission about leaving a record of their language and are glad to work with a linguist to achieve that goal. In northeastern Australia the last Warrungu speaker, Alf Palmer, told researcher Tasaku Tsunoda, “When I die, this language will die. I’ll teach you everything I know, so put it down properly” (Tsunoda 2005: 98). But as James Collins found in working with a thin scattering of Tolowa speakers in northern California, the linguist’s narrow focus on contrastive forms and their distributions can be a very long way from what the remaining speakers have in mind when agreeing to a joint effort to record their language. “Simply put”, writes Collins, “they were interested in words, not grammar” (Collins 1998: 260; see also Grinevald 2001: 295). Such discrepancies suggest the potential for conflicting objectives in any joint work involving academic researchers and community members and for discordant notions on the part of the two parties about the responsibilities of the researcher in the wake of that work.

2 The Responsibilities of Late-Stage Fieldwork

As gatherers of increasingly scarce and highly valued information, endangered-language researchers are typically responsible to at least three distinct constituencies: other scholars; individuals like Alf Palmer who serve as their sources; and the ethnic community at large (including, for example, younger Warrungu and Tolowa who were growing up without their ancestral language).1

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1 A fourth constituency not discussed here, some sort of funding agency, may or may not be involved. For prolonged fieldwork in distant locations, institutional financial support is a