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Speakers and documentation of endangered languages

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1. Preamble

This is an expanded version of my presentation at the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Workshop. It is unthinkable to me not to dedicate this paper to Ken Hale (1933-2001), who should have been among us on this occasion. Ken Hale who is the one who said that we should go and talk to our colleague linguists about endangered languages at a time nobody did or dared, and who organized a panel on the topic at the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) annual meeting in December 1991, to mark the coming of the year 1992. This was to be the year of the celebrations of the so-called "500 years of the discovery of America" which indigenous communities up and down the Americas were protesting. The panel discussion, which was quickly published in the Society's journal *Language* (March 1992), provoking subsequent debate in the journal (see the ensuing Ladefoged-Dorian exchange), was followed by a declaration of the LSA on endangered languages and the creation of the LSA Endangered Language Committee. I want to note the incredible sense of awe I feel, wishing Ken would be here today to realize the way I do how far we have moved, and so we could laugh at our incredible tension and his panic attack just before walking in the packed ballroom of the LSA; because we were walking in there to talk about endangered languages, and therefore in part about "politics", a dirty word in U.S. academia. We were aware of raising a taboo subject and we owe it to him to have done it then. We were there to raise not only the issue of language endangerment, but also the intrinsic complex political nature of such situations, of the socio-political dimensions of fieldwork on those languages, and of our relations to the speakers of those languages.

The December 1991 LSA panel was followed by a panel on endangered languages at the International Congress of Linguists in Quebec in 1992, and, a year later, by a working conference on endangered languages at Dartmouth. Three of us did this circuit coordinating our presentations as a whole: Mike Krauss would speak first, with his wake-up call introducing the statistics of 90 % of the languages of the world being endangered, speech that he even took to Congress for us (Krauss 1992, in Grenoble and Whaley 1997 and Matsumura 1998). Ken Hale would come second and try to impress on people what kind of human wealth was lost when a language was lost, giving examples from Australian or Amerindian languages of linguistic creativity (Hale 1992, in Grenoble and Whaley 1997), and I would come last, as the third of the "Three Stooges" (as I liked to call us), and talk about more mundane, and almost dirty, stuff: talk about ethics, and field methods, and about relations to the communities. (Craig 1992a). And here I am again, doing my part, but missing Ken's presence and honouring his memory.

Besides Ken Hale, there is another person I want to mention here, who could not be at the workshop in London but whose presence I wish to invoke to give her the place she deserves on this occasion. Nancy Dorian is the linguist who started talking and publishing about language death and language attrition back in the seventies, and more specifically for the focus of my talk here, the one who raised the issue of the types of speakers one encounters in such situation and the complexity of their relation to their ethnic language (Dorian 1982, 1986). I want therefore to acknowledge here the pioneering work she has produced that has been an inspiration to so many of us, and on a more personal tone the steady and stimulating email correspondence I carry on with her, that makes me feel almost as if I was speaking for both of us at times.

2. Introduction[1]

Within the major task in front of us of "intellectualising and theorizing" the business of documenting endangered languages, I would like to focus on the foundation itself of such work, that is to say on the human relations between linguists and speakers of the languages they set out to document. To focus therefore on what happens in fact before we can begin to collect data, which means to focus on who the speakers on the other side of the cameras and the microphones we point at them are, on whether what we ask them to do makes sense to them and on how they might feel about it. By talking about the speakers behind the microphones and cameras, I want to also focus our attention on what kind of data we are collecting, and how we do it with them.

My goal is therefore to consider the human factor in the enterprise of linguistic fieldwork, in order to highlight some of the specific challenges one can anticipate encountering in the kind of projects we are talking about here, the documentation of endangered languages. And the main point I want to make is that, if any fieldwork is already a complicated matter in general, and fieldwork on unwritten, under-described languages is particularly challenging, fieldwork on endangered languages certainly adds new dimensions to this challenge that we would do well to ponder. As a matter of fact, while the challenges of fieldwork on un-described languages are already not always understood or valued for what they are in academic circles, the common additional pressures and complications of situations of endangered languages are most likely even less known or understood from the outside. It is also probably worth acknowledging that some of what I will say may not appear to go well with the notion of punctual, efficient

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[1] A number of readers of the manuscript of this paper have given me valuable feedback. Among them I would like to thank in particular Nancy Dorian, Scott DeLancey and Loretta O'Connor for their careful reading and insightful suggestions. I take of course full responsibility for the final version of this text, for its tone as well as its content.

fieldwork aimed at producing quick documentation, although I am pretty convinced that it addresses some of the essential issue of how to produce the best quality documentation.

3. Credentials of a fieldworker

What I have to say stems from more than 30 years of fieldwork experience in Latin America in different capacities and in very different circumstances, and almost 30 of teaching and training or mentoring fieldworkers. I started in the early 1970s with descriptive work on a Mayan language of Guatemala, for a PhD degree and early career, and was forced to suspend fieldwork at the end of the decade by what has been called euphemistically 'la violencia' that tore through the Guatemalan Mayan communities. This was a reminder of the precarious situation of many indigenous people and the difficult socio-political context of fieldwork on many endangered languages. I resurfaced as a fieldworker in the 1980s for ten years of work on the Rama language of Nicaragua, as the linguist of a moribund language rescue and revitalization project in the context of the Sandinista Revolution and the establishment of the autonomy of the region where the last indigenous languages of the country are still spoken. This fieldwork was curtailed in part by a change of government. I then visited and consulted for a documentation project of the Tsafiki language of the lowland of Ecuador, a still very vital community of speakers whose life style and land self sufficiency is increasingly threatened. There followed fieldwork in Bolivia in 1995 and 1996 to work for a new government that had just sponsored the officialization of all the native languages and was making plans for extensive bilingual education programs: I coordinated the production of "normalized" alphabets for nineteen of the indigenous languages of the Amazonian and Andean regions, but of most interest here is that a number of them qualified as endangered languages, some of them being clearly at a moribund stage, and the work was done as much as possible through the training of teams of speakers sent by the indigenous organizations.

In the last decade my work has been more that of a senior faculty participating in the training of field linguists, the majority linguists from various Latin American countries. When I have taught linguistics at the CCELA in Bogotá, I have worked with junior linguists who do sometimes harrowing fieldwork in the Amazonian region of Colombia, and in my occasional participation to the training of native speakers of indigenous language, through the ENAH and CIESAS programs of Mexico or the OKMA Mayan linguistic institute in Guatemala I have listened to the special challenges of native younger linguists returning to work in their own communities. I have also taught intensive seminars on fieldwork[2], that have required pondering what there is to say to prospective

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[2] On three occasions, in Köln (1993) and Kiel (1996) funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, and in Belem (Brazil) in 1993 funded by CnPQ and US-AID.

linguistic fieldworkers, particularly about the circumstances that concern us here, work on endangered languages.

I have recently decided to return to my old field sites in Guatemala and Nicaragua, I had left twenty and ten years ago, and have started observing their evolving situations, pondering the work of the past and the needs of the present. On one hand the Jakaltek-Popti' language of Guatemala that seemed vital in the seventies has turned into one of the most endangered languages of the country, and has become the preoccupation of a new language academy, for instance.[3] On the other hand the Rama language rescued in the 80s through work with three speakers is now the object of a language and culture revitalization program at the heart of the struggle for the survival of the community as such, community now engaged in legal international battles to defend its territory.

These thirty years have therefore spanned a whole array of fieldwork situations, from more narrowly academic and theoretically oriented linguistic description in the 70s, to more typologically oriented linguistic approach in the 1980s, to increasingly more efforts in teaching, training and mentoring in the 1990s, with a return to fieldwork today, contemplating changes of circumstances, in the languages themselves as well as in the linguistic community. It is an understanding of the field shaped by a Latin American experience, with increasingly common encounters with endangered languages, increasingly threatened survival of the communities, and much listening to, working with and observing speakers of those communities.

All this to say that I talk or write about what I have lived and wrestled with over the last decades, admittedly a specifically Latin American experience that in obvious ways may not apply to other parts of the world, although I believe that much of what I can say today is generic enough of situations of endangered languages around the world that it likely to be of some general interest. At this point of my career I find myself most concerned with the issue of what there is to teach to those that will go and do the documentation of endangered languages, of how to train them as well as support them, in tangible and intangible ways in their back and forth movements between academia and the field. I am also concerned with the issue of how to articulate to the outside world what this line of work in endangered languages communities is about, to account for some of the essential and maybe unsuspected aspects of it, choosing to talk here about some aspects of the working relations we linguist establish with the speakers who will share with us their language so it can be "documented".

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[3] The story of the evolution of Mayan linguistics matters is reflected in the changing orthography and name of the language, from the Spanish based spelling Jacaltec associated with missionary work of the 1960s to the new official spelling Jakaltek of the late 1980s, to the actual change of name, to Popti', decided by the Mayan Academy of languages.

I know from experience that there are no recipes for how to do it, that absolutely every field situation is different, always a unique formula that results from the combination of such variables as the political context, the state of the language, the situation of the community of speakers, the language skills and attitudes of the speakers with whom we work at recording the language, and the personality and profile of the linguists and other members of the research team, natives, nationals and foreigners. Beyond the specificities of each field situation, I can think of essential issues that must always be faced when working on endangered languages, and will start with some food for thought about fieldwork in general, and about the current fieldwork frameworks discussed in this 21st century, to consider next the question of the great variety of types of speakers encountered in situations of language endangerment, to close with implications that working with such types of speakers might have for the methods of data collecting to be used if we want to ensure getting not only interesting but also reliable data, including appropriate linguistic analysis of them.

4. Three key concepts about fieldwork

My assumption is that something about fieldwork can and should be taught, a posture well established for other disciplines relying on fieldwork such as anthropology or sociology, but still not as widespread in linguistic circles as one might think, where the "sink or swim" posture of my graduate days can still be encountered. I mean to talk about the contents of a possible course on "fieldwork", beyond the scope of strictly "linguistic field methods" courses many of us took or have taught, a course that would offer complementary discussions of more general issues of fieldwork, such as the kind of issues raised here. To start with, I will offer three perspectives I collected from the writings of three fieldworkers I trust to have extensive experience in what they profess.

4.1. Fieldwork as an art

I owe this way of conceptualising fieldwork, and whether therefore it can be taught, to the anthropologist Harry Wolcott who wrote a marvellous book entitled "The Art of Fieldwork" (1995). For first, let us consider here his characterization of fieldwork, as a type of research that involves the following features:

a. that it is research on site
b. that involves a long term relationship and
c. that involves direct personal involvement. (p 28)

These three features taken together certainly ring true to many of us Amerindianists; it is the kind of story that Tony Woodbury presents in his paper in this volume, or that I alluded to with my fieldwork on the Jakaltek-Popti' and Rama languages, for instance. They are worth pondering in the context of contemplating the task of the documentation of

endangered languages because they may seem to run counter to some of the expectations and demands set by the basic functioning of major foundations, in terms of agendas and time tables. It is probably good to resist what some of us feel as a sense of hype and almost frenzy and rush that is being generated by the campaigns to raise awareness of the issue of endangered languages. For it would seem that considering the nature of such fieldwork, efficient and adequate "documentation" will ideally rely on well-established working relations with the community at large, and already established basic knowledge of the language, as worked out between selected speakers and appropriately trained linguists. All that, of course, in the context of an unavoidable personal involvement of the linguists, involvement that may take various shapes, as will be considered below with the discussion of fieldwork frameworks.

Having set those as some essential characteristics of fieldwork, I will return now to Wolcott's thoughts on the issue of whether fieldwork can be taught, if it is to be considered more as an art than as a craft. If fieldwork in general were simply a craft (I am not talking here about the more craft-like aspect of linguistic field methods of elicitation and analysis of field methods courses, but of the general experience of fieldwork), one could envision how to teach it, with tools and check lists, tests and questionnaires in view of relatively preformatted products; this approach has been tried indeed, and is legitimate for a good part of the work. However, what about teaching (about) fieldwork if it is, as I agree myself, more of an art? Here is Wolcott's answer to the question that I have found inspiring and have tried to practice. After admitting that "…the artistic side can be taught only up to a point", he then adds that "we need to consider how that dimension can be nurtured, coaxed, teased out, fanned—whatever it is that any one individual can do to encourage another to do by way of providing experience, advice, ideas, illustrations, anecdotes, resources, or sometimes, simply great expectations" (p30).

This means then that we, as experienced fieldworkers, could be talking of what we have done and share what we have learned; and that we would need to find ways to support those that do the work, both on a one-to-one basis and through creating more institutional space, in funding agencies, within academic programs. The value of unconditionally supportive professors who can stand there by younger fieldworkers who must cope, among other things, with the dissonance between pressures and tensions of the field and sometimes contradictory pressures and tensions of academia is not to be underestimated. We can also ponder collectively how to minimize the rate of drop-out and lost work, a subject rarely addressed openly, although it is a non-negligible part of such fieldwork endeavours that are by nature costly in resources, time, energy, and personal investment.

4.2. Fieldwork frameworks: "Fieldwork ON/FOR/WITH…and /BY"

The basis of fieldwork is fundamentally an array of human relations, undeniably interwoven in multiple patterns of power relations. The best way I have found to

conceptualize the various overall patterns of such relations I have taken from the writings of Deborah Cameron and her colleagues, essentially their 1992 book entitled "Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method". I took from it the concept of fieldwork "framework" and the elegant formulations that characterize the patterns that have been prevalent over the last decades. [4]

Just a simple change of preposition in a formula meant to characterize the major ways one can approach fieldwork seems apt to evoke powerfully the different types of relation that can hold between speakers of a language being studied and field linguists, that are by and large from academic institutions they leave for the field but must return to. Cameron et al discuss the following frameworks: (a) fieldwork first simply conceived of as fieldwork ON a language; (b) fieldwork with the added dimension of doing it FOR a language community; (c) fieldwork WITH the speakers of the language community rather than FOR them. To this final step in the evolution of frameworks discussed back in the 1992 publication, one should add now (d) the possibility and ideally ultimate goal of fieldwork done BY speakers of the language community themselves.[5]

(a)   Fieldwork ON a language.

This is the traditional type of fieldwork, the pattern prevalent in the first half of the 20th century, carried out by individual linguists for purely academic purposes, with individual speakers. One can think of Sapir and Bloomfield as representatives of this early framework. Cameron et al refer to this framework as the "ethical" framework, as they make this initial framework span over the later period that saw the appearance of

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[4] Admittedly the conceptualizing work done by this team of fieldworkers reflects both a broad social science perspective, not necessarily addressing issues of linguistic analysis or language documentation, and a North American perspective. What may feel like new insights here are likely to feel much more matter of fact when seen from a Latin American academic perspective.

[5] I would like to acknowledge here specifically the participants of the 1997 conference on Amazonian languages in Belem, Brazil, and the lively discussions held between the linguists working on those languages from their respective bases: foreign linguists, national linguists, and native speakers trained as linguists in various academic programs and working on their languages with their communities (See Queixalos & Renault-Lescure 2000). There is no escaping either mentioning the situation of the study of Mayan languages of Guatemala now basically in the hands of trained native speakers of those languages. See England (1992, 1995) and Cojti' Cuxil (1990), and an overview of that evolution over the last 20 years in Grinevald (2002).

professional codes of ethics meant to govern the working relations between fieldworkers and their "informants".[6]

(b)   Fieldwork FOR the language community.

This framework developed in the 1960s, at the time of political activism about civil rights, with the added dimension of the fieldworkers making themselves useful to the community of speakers of the language one was working ON. To the extent that the fieldworkers became involved in speaking FOR the community, this framework has also been labelled the "advocacy" framework. A prototypical case of such an approach is given by Cameron et al as the work of Labov on behalf of the African-American community of Black Vernacular English (B.V.E.) speakers. A typical example of such activism was his intervention before the US Congress to argue that B.V.E. was a language variety of its own right, with its own rules of grammar, and not simply a distortion and deterioration of English.

(c)   Fieldwork WITH speakers of the language community.

This is the framework that developed in the 1980s and covers what has come under the label of "action research", or "negotiated fieldwork". It has also later been called by some the "empowering" fieldwork framework. This framework is the first one to consider giving equal say and partnership to the speakers of the language under study. This framework developed under pressure from more and more organized communities that articulated demands for full participation in the process of research on and documentation of their languages, from the initial steps of planning research to the final step of the production of materials and of their publication. This framework applies to most fieldwork on US reservations today and in many Latin American countries; it is the dominant one in Australia (see the guidelines and code of ethics from the Australian Linguistic Society for instance, Peter Austin, this volume, Wilkins 2000).

(d)   Fieldwork BY speakers of the language community.

This is more and more what we are coming to today, at the dawn of this 21st century, at the time when documentation of endangered languages becomes part of the agenda of the

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[6] The expression is to be taken literally as corresponding to the time of the formulation of the first codes of ethics, independent of how outdated those codes may appear to us now. The term ethical has clearly taken on much wider connotations today, as is evident in the content of the codes of ethics being elaborated for the new VW-DOBES and HRELP programs.

linguistic profession. If one stops to contemplate what it would take to create the possibility that it is the speakers of a language community who document their own language as much as possible, with expertise from outside linguists as necessary, one can envision the new types of relations that would need to develop between academic foreign linguists and future native linguists and native speakers. This means for outside linguists, foreign or nationals, to combine doing fieldwork with teaching, training, and mentoring native speakers for sustainable documentation projects. This is clearly the aimed-for state of affairs in most of Latin America today (as discussed for instance Queixalos & Renault-Lescure (2000), in particular in Grinevald (2000)). It is a framework in which the various types of language projects being developed today overlap: linguistic descriptions meant to produce optimally the standard triad grammar-texts-dictionary, language documentation aimed at capturing the language in as many types of language use as are still possible to document, from a multidisciplinary approach encompassing as much of the culture as still feasible (including ethno-history/biology/ botany/musicology etc…), and language preservation and revitalization projects, with support to bilingual education programs among their priorities.[7]

There is no doubt that to the extent that conditions permit, it is in these last two frameworks, of WITH and BY, that most documentation projects are to be conceived today if/when the goal is comprehensiveness and quality of the data collected, reliability of the analysis, and sustainability of the documentation process. Woodbury's recount (this volume) of the evolution of his long term field relations is a good illustration of an academic linguist's career spanning over the various fieldwork frameworks outlined here.

4.3. A provocative thought: sometimes no fieldwork on an endangered language is better than some.

My third general point is one to ponder before embarking into some field situation; it is something that one should learn to stop and think about sometimes although it runs counter to two major schemes. It runs counter, for instance, to the sense of urgency that may be instilled by hype campaigns seeking to attract attention to the dire situation of language

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[7] The issue of the role of the linguist in all these types of projects would require more space than available here. This is indeed an area of potential conflict between traditional linguistic academic perspective and speaker community perspective, and one of the major sources of dissonance which fieldworkers may have to deal with in their back-and-forth movement between the field and academia (the situation is different for professional linguists hired by and working for linguistic communities). To be sure, academic linguists are primarily responsible for producing linguistics and are not "social workers", but just as surely, speakers are not simply study subjects and sources of data, particularly in most situations of endangered languages. The challenge is in developing a negotiated productive working relation infused with respect and give-and-take to meet enough of the needs of both sides.

endangerment, that may unwittingly lead to the conviction of the absolute good of "saving" endangered languages, and therefore that any fieldwork on an endangered language is always better than none . It also runs counter, of course, to a sense of some absolute value of science, justifying doing any fieldwork possible for the sake of science, a stance commonly promoted within the academic ivory tower.

Both views tend to obliterate the essence of the link that holds between languages and their speakers, in particular speakers of unwritten, un-standardized languages who may display a sense of ownership unknown to speakers of dominant languages. They obliterate as well the intricacies of the link between researchers and researched that characterize any kind of fieldwork, but can be exacerbated when working with endangered language communities. Both views take as priority some higher and abstract good, that of the knowledge about a language, and disconnect it from the reality of languages that exist only in their use by speakers.

This issue is very complex and would deserve much more space than is available here, the point being mainly here to raise it, so it enters the consciousness of those potentially concerned and gets registered as a possibility.[8] This is why feasibility studies are recommended, initial reconnaissance trips to get a sense of the dynamics of the community, to network and consult with other fieldworkers who have dealt with the community or neighbouring ones. A good rule of thumb for fieldwork should be to not leave the field any worse than it was before, giving time to situations to evolve and working relations to take shape.[9] It is possible here probably to distinguish between the different types of linguistic projects mentioned earlier, for instance between doing the description of a language with some individuals willing to cooperate,[10] and doing the

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[8] The way it was already mentioned in passing that it happens more often than known or acknowledged that fieldwork may be abandoned, aborted or denied continuation, for any number of reasons, from the most personal to the most political.

[9] There can be no fast rule here, the issue being a matter of taking the well-being of the community into account and keeping it in mind. Sometimes hostile early relations turn into open cooperation, sometimes the reverse. Some fields closed at first may later open up, because of the example of a project working well with a neighbouring community for instance; just as some fields may shut down because of some interpretation of some event involving the linguists.

[10] And for that, one must acknowledge how much courage and determination some of the speakers working with linguists must have to continue working as linguistic consultants even though they may suffer from much negative behavior on the part of the community. It is not uncommon for them to be accused of selling the language, of selling secrets, of giving away what does not belong just to them and to suffer ostracism. Craig (1992b) is partly the story of such dynamics in the Rama language rescue project.

documentation of a language, which is socially more complex in that it calls for dealing with the larger community.

This concern I have heard best articulated by Australianists colleague, although it has been a topic of concern also to Amerindianists: that sometimes doing no fieldwork on an endangered language is best. This point is well argued in Wilkins (2000), according to whom "in fragile, embattled, minority indigenous communities, good intentions are not sufficient for good and useful results, and we must be self-reflective and self-critical about the sort of practices we engage in that unwittingly will exacerbate rather than alleviate the problem" (p1). [11] No doubt, such concern is not part of standard linguistics graduate training programs and rarely part of the syllabus of field methods courses. Contemplating this option requires therefore stepping back and disconnecting from narrower academic concerns, and taking in the full political dimension of the type of work documenting an endangered language can be. It means subsuming the priorities of the discipline, for which the documentation of some specific languages may answer research questions about genetic relations or typological issues for instance, to the interests of the community of speakers.

I would like to add here another perspective to this injunction about being prepared to step back and consider that no fieldwork on some endangered languages might be better than any fieldwork: that rather than obsess or focus on field situations that are not good prospects for one reason or another, we try to attend to those communities that are seeking the help and expertise of linguists. Because we should always keep in sight another dimension of the business of documenting endangered languages, which is that there is in fact an acute shortage worldwide of trained linguists to tackle this formidable task and that we lack the peoplepower to attend even to the communities that are looking for the kind of linguistic expertise we can offer them. [12]

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[11] The Australian continent is indeed the region of the world where the relations between field linguists and aboriginal speakers communities have been the subject of much open discussions, negotiations and maturation. See the annex to Austin's presentation (this volume).

[12] I would also offer the same perspective (of suggesting that we turn our attention to those many communities that do want their endangered languages documented and focus on finding them the linguists for the job (or train new ones)) as an indirect response to a recurring line of criticism against some of the work on endangered languages. It is the criticism that consists in accusing linguists advocating the documentation and/or revitalization of endangered languages of some form of paternalistic and colonial attitude in wanting to work with the languages at all cost, even those that speakers themselves do not want to maintain or care to document.

5. A typology of speakers of endangered languages

The notion of a typology of speakers may not be obvious to speakers of dominant languages, born, raised, educated, and working within their native language, a language that surrounds them at all times of the day, in their private life as well as in the public one they circulate in, one that is safely referenced in grammars and dictionaries, and exemplified in admired literary writings. When working on French, English, or Japanese, one is surrounded by innumerable native speakers who have learned the language of their parents as a matter of course, who are un-self-consciously chatting away in it, many of whom are willing to be interviewed, taped or questioned. Those speakers feel secure that the language is well taken care of in the innumerable reference books that are available, and linguists can assemble large databases with printed and conversational material.

Things are less straightforward when working on still relatively vital but under-described languages, situations in which creating a database on the language becomes a time-consuming and challenging process. Among other things, one must learn to deal with an omnipresent language variation and the lack of standardized norms, and with the language attitudes that accompany them. At least one is able to sit in public places and listen in on the language, one can hope to learn to speak it some and then try it out on people; and one can choose from a great variety of speakers those that one feels suitable as competent native speakers and compatible companions.

But when faced with the enterprise of working on an endangered language, one suddenly realizes the luxury of much of what seemed to have been taken for granted, including in standard university field methods courses. It is not just a question of a more limited number of speakers, and of a more limited choice about whom to work with. It is also a much more challenging set of complex attitudes of the speakers (and non-speakers) towards the language, at all levels, from the individual speakers working with the linguists, to the language community at large, or even the regional and national level policies. This complexity often takes the shape of apparent contradictions, that can easily disorient or discourage the linguists of dominant languages as we field linguists usually are.

Nancy Dorian stands out for me as the linguist that first articulated the variety of speakers one encounters in situations of endangered languages (Dorian 1981) and began to reveal some of these complex attitudes any fieldworker needs to be prepared to detect and learn to work with in the field (Dorian 1982, 1986). Grinevald Craig (1997) offers a summary survey of the various initial typologies one could find in the literature in the 1990s. [13] Much remains to be done on this issue of a typology of speakers, which will only at best provide us with outlines of major prototypes of speakers, in view of the almost infinite individual variations. Such typology need to consider the combination of many

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[13] Grinevald (2001) also includes a discussion of the typology, including the inappropriateness of part of the terminology being used, and an application to the case study of the Rama language project.

variables such as child language learning, past and present language use, language attitudes, as well as adult language attrition and possible (re)learning. While a refined and truly comprehensive typology remains to be done, the main point to be made here is that talking about the great variety of types of speakers is an essential component of the intellectualizing of this new sub-field of linguistics that aims to dedicate itself to the documentation of endangered languages. [14]

The major types of speakers identified in the existing literature to be introduced below are (a) fluent speakers (b) semi-speakers (c) terminal speakers and (d) rememberers.

(a) native fluent speakers.

These are the speakers who field linguists would prefer to work with, of which one can find two subtypes in situations of endangered languages. The so-called "old" fluent speakers who may be monolinguals, certainly dominant in their ethnic language, in contrast to "young" fluent speakers, who are bilinguals with great fluency and mastery of the ethnic language that they have generally learned as their first language.[15] A key difference between them is the sense that old speakers speak what is considered a traditional form of the language, while the young fluent have introduced, due to their bilingualism, changes in the language. But crucially those changes would not strike the old fluent speakers as unacceptable and they would consider the young fluent speakers as good speakers too.

(b)   semi-speakers.

This is the category of speakers emblematic of situations of endangered languages. Semi-speakers are bilinguals whose dominant language is not the ethnic language being

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[14] The same could be said of entering the field of study of sign languages, which share with endangered languages a strong social and individual psychology of being speakers of un-empowered, dominated and undervalued languages. The attitudes of such speakers that live daily with this imbalance of power account for complex relations to speakers of dominant languages, as most linguists dealing with these languages are. A typology of signers in fact would be very interesting to establish, as well as its comparison with a typology of speakers of endangered languages, the two types of languages communities at the same time sharing essential features and being fundamentally different.

[15] Age may not be the main characterization of these "young fluent speakers". Depending on the state of endangerment of the language at the time the field linguist enters into contact with the community, this category of speakers may in fact include individuals that have reached a mature age. More important for their characterization are the linguistic characteristics of their mastery of the language.

documented, although they can be near fluent in it. They too have introduced changes in their way of speaking it, but the degree to which changes are introduced and the number of structural items to which they are applied are not accepted by the old fluent speakers who serve as the reference group. This category of speakers spans a wide range of speakers from near-fluent to quite limited speakers. They generally do not use the language regularly and naturally because they do not have regular conversational partners. [16] They all share however a good mastery of the socio-linguistic norms of the language, behaving appropriately in environments of ethnic language use, capable of producing greetings, short standard answers, joining in songs and laughing at the humour.

Semi-speakers are key people in situations of language endangerments because they may provide the largest cohort of speakers, and because it is crucially among them that emerge the activists of language documentation and language maintenance or revitalization, as the case may be. It is among them generally that one will find the community members best trained or wanting to be trained as assistants and partners in documentation projects. [17] Semi-speakers are likely to be the ones to lead the linguists to the native speakers, such as the best story-tellers for instance. On the other hand, they may also fail to mention the existence of fluent speakers, either because they ignore the fact that some of the community members are in fact speakers or because of ambivalent feelings about socially marginalized native speakers particularly in situations of massive language shift. It is with this category of speakers that one can typically encounter very contradictory attitudes, such as common cases of speakers over-evaluating or under-evaluating their language skills, and inaccurate categorization of other speakers' skills.

(c)   terminal speakers

The terminology may not be more fortunate than the term of "semi-speaker" but it is also widely used in current typologies. It comes from the metaphor of language "death", and does not mean dying speakers but very limited language skills of some of the language community members. These are speakers of the dominant language who may know some phrases, or simply some words of the endangered language. They may however be considered as members of the language community, as opposed to outsiders simply learning elements of the language.

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[16] N. Dorian (p.c.)

[17] Not that there will not be fluent speakers for that, but those fluent speakers are likely to be either marginalized and/or old people or else be so important in the community so as to not be really available because of their official duties (professional or religious or cultural responsibilities: political representatives of the community, religious leaders, shamans etc…).

(d)   rememberers

This last category corresponds to speakers who once in their life-time had a better knowledge of the language, but who, for some reason, have lost much of that knowledge. It could be that they were speakers but that they were forced to abandon using the language in some traumatic circumstances and have subsequently lost fluency in it, or that they were never active speakers of it in the first place and have even lost much of their passive bilingualism.[18] It could be that in some cases this type of language attrition can be partly reversed and that these speakers recover part of their capacity with the language.

As mentioned earlier, this is not a fixed and comprehensive typology of speakers, and more types may yet need to be considered. Most likely the typology will consist in identifying the major parameters to be considered when doing individual evaluations of members of the endangered language community. These parameters will need to include patterns of language acquisition and loss, levels of active and passive knowledge, and patterns of social interactions. Beyond this issue of different types of speakers, however is a constant of such language situations: it is the common complexity of feelings such members of endangered language communities are likely to hold towards such a language. These feelings can be at once ones of pride and shame, or of confidence and lack thereof, or of acute interest and actual neglect or avoidance. The nature of such often contradictory feelings, and their potential intensity can be disconcerting to fieldworkers who are speakers of dominant languages and who have never had to justify speaking or not speaking their language, never had to wonder about the legitimacy or value of their language, and certainly never had to feel responsible for the survival of their language. [19]

        Such a variety of types of speakers to be reckoned with in situations of endangered languages, particularly when the languages reach an advanced stage of endangerment, naturally brings about, among others, the issues of whom to count when counting the so-called "speakers" of such languages to evaluate the degree of vitality or endangerment of

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[18] Cases of traumatic pressures could be massacres of indigenous populations leading to the need to hide one's origins and therefore stop speaking the language abruptly, as was the case in El Salvador in the 1930s; or such as severe social ostracism against traditional jungle people as in the case of some Rama former speakers after they arrived into a more sedentary community that had shifted to a dominant language (a variety of Creole) and scorned more traditional speakers. N. Dorian(p.c.), on the basis her field experience in a Scottish Gaelic situation is more familiar with cases of rememberers who fall into the category of former passive bilinguals.

[19] Although of course, one can (smilingly?) acknowledge in passing the great concern of many French speakers for the survival of their language in view of the perceived threat of an English takeover.

the language, and of whom to include in work on endangered languages, whether in linguistic description or in language documentation, or in language revitalization programs.

6. The typology of speakers of endangered languages and its possible implications for fieldwork for their documentation.

Having established the much more varied spectrum of types of speakers in situation of language endangerment than is commonly found in dominant language communities (where the clear majority falls within what corresponds to the "old fluent" speakers), it remains to consider what kind of implications such a variety may have on doing fieldwork in order to document those languages. The issues to be briefly commented upon here will be about whom to work with then, and about how to deal with the dynamics of such variety of speakers, and how to adapt linguistic field methods of data elicitation and data analysis to such types of speakers.

6.1. Who to work with

It is actually not uncommon to enter the community of endangered languages through semi-speakers, to the extent that this type of speaker may be the most aware of the impending loss of the language, its lack of documentation and the need to record it quickly. These speakers fall into a category often referred to as "foreigner seekers". They may present themselves as good speakers and seek employment as main informants or consultants, although they may not be in the end the best speakers in terms of fluency in the language and knowledge of oral tradition. But they are generally essential to projects of documentation, because of their knowledge of the community and their interest in the project, their actual knowledge of the language, even if it turns out to be more limited than professed at first when time comes to actually do linguistic analysis, and their being fully bilingual and generally the best trained people in the community. Although old fluent speakers seem to be the obvious speakers to seek out, and ultimately are the source of the major recordings of the language, they may or may not make good linguistic informants, depending on their age and sophistication, and their analytical and linguistic talents.

It may be therefore be good to keep in mind that a project of language documentation is a matter of a team effort, if the documentation is to be comprehensive, and that in that perspective, one should try never to turn away any member of the language community that expresses interest in working on the project, including less fluent semi-speakers or terminal speakers (or even non speakers). For one thing, there are often not too many members of the community actually interested in taking an active part in such projects, at least at first; for another, one never knows how things will evolve, and what contribution any particular person can make. Non-speakers can lead to good speakers, they can also be trained, particularly if young, for the more technical parts of the project,

including doing the actual recordings; they are valuable team members because of their natural link to the community, and of course, good candidates to learn the language if they really mean to.

Of course, for the actual linguistic analysis, the linguist will need to rely on not only good speakers but also speakers with reasonably good linguistic intuitions. Ideally the linguistic analysis will have to rely on the skills of various speakers with different talents: story tellers, encyclopaedic minds, analytical minds, natural linguists that exist in all human communities in equally reliable but small proportions. [20] And semi-speakers should not be overlooked because in their less complete knowledge of the language, as they may in fact know some aspects of the language that others, even better speakers, don't know anymore. The term "ideally" referred of course to the special situation of very endangered languages where of course, but definition, choices of speakers have become very limited.

6.2. Dynamics and evolutions

While a typology categorizing speakers is being worked out, it is important to consider how it should not be a static classification, and how the profile of an endangered language community is not static either. Communities that are said to have no more speakers may turn out to have some, while others said to have just a handful may turn out to have dozens. Furthermore, those pointed at or self-declared earlier on as being the best speakers may not be the best in the end, while ignored or silent speakers may turn out to be good speakers. Another important aspect of this dynamic dimension, is that, at all times in any categorization or typology, one must incorporate the basic fact that language can be learned and relearned. This means crucially that given time and proper conditions, committed semi- and terminal speakers can indeed learn the language and take greater part in the documentation projects, including the actual linguistic work, and that rememberers as well may be induced to reactivate part of their knowledge of the language and also become active participants.

6.3. Adapting methods of linguistic elicitation and analysis

It should be clear by now that doing fieldwork, in particular in those situations of endangered languages, does not resemble much the kind of fieldwork experience one can be exposed to in most university courses of field methods offered on campus with some

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[20] Like for other talents, like music or poetry, a few % of the general population. This means in case of severe endangerment there is less likelihood of a large choice of speakers, although this severe statistical limitation seems to be easily compensated by the phenomenon of generally extremely talented and sharp last old fluent speakers. As if these last speakers were indeed special people in having held on to their language and their identity, mindful of the language they still possess.

generally well integrated bilingual speakers. For instance, in real field situations one cannot necessarily count on the speakers hired for the job to walk in reliably at the time thought to have been agreed upon, one also needs to cope most likely with a very local variety of the working language the speaker shares with the linguist, and one discovers quickly how much work habits are not shared. But beyond these aspects of work relations in the field that are shared by all fieldworkers and are amply discussed in the literature on fieldwork (on how to chose an informant, decide on work place, work schedule, compensation for time worked), one must usually also rethink something essential: the kind of actual data collection methods one was most likely taught in graduate school.

Work on endangered languages does not allow indeed much of the standard approach of direct elicitation that relies on translation from a dominant language into the language under study. Not that this approach should be recommended from the start in any case, but in these circumstances, it may well turn out to be absolutely unusable. Beyond the unavoidable initial elicitation of isolated words to establish an initial transcription system and the tone of the working relation, a text-based approach is most recommendable when the time comes to consider morphology and syntax. Such an approach establishes a certain balance of power between linguist and speakers, giving a chance for the speaker to feel at ease and confident. This is particularly crucial in situation of work with some of the last speakers of a language, because of the mixed feelings such speakers may hold, including marked feelings of linguistic insecurity.

In fact the situation may be such that even recording a simple text may not be possible at first, as speakers need to be probed into reactivating their fluency. It may well be that these speakers are isolated enough to not have used the language for a while, a long time even. They may not know of the existence of other speakers, or simply may have had no opportunity to be reunited with speakers in a long time. It is therefore particularly useful to organize reunions of speakers, to give them time to enjoy socializing, to enjoy meeting other speakers. Recreating some social setting for natural language use can lead to improved fluency and open up the possibility of good language recordings.

If there is no good story-teller capable to begin providing narratives, there is always the possibility of recording interactive data, although that interaction may need to be stimulated by providing some material to talk about. This could be any number of stimuli. One could read old material collected earlier and ask for comments, or have the speakers listen to old recordings or recordings from other speakers not present, maybe speakers from a neighbouring community, or bring objects to handle and describe, or pictures to comment on. It is only after having established some working rapport and ease of language production that one should proceed to more strictly defined elicitation, including possibly experimentally formatted elicitation. It is all really a matter of common sense, as much of fieldwork really is, but academia does not focus on fostering common sense approaches. The main point is that speakers of unwritten languages in general need time to establish a working relation with the linguists, and linguists should take particular care in letting them

feel confident by giving them a chance to be the experts. It is always a shock to realize the extent to which what may seem basic notions of repetition, translation, or assessment of grammaticality are bewildering and meaningless to such speakers, when these constitute the mainstay of the methods linguists are taught to use. Caution in methods used is therefore particularly recommended when working at first with speakers of endangered languages, whether with older and possibly socially marginalized fluent speakers, or with possibly more worldly but linguistically less secure speakers.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of this presentation has been to give the speakers their rightful central place in discussions about the nature of projects of documentation of endangered languages. The focus has been therefore more on the process than on the product of the documentation of endangered languages, more on the human than on the more strictly linguistic or technological components of the enterprise. The idea was to point to some of the specifics of the relations that hold between field linguists and the speakers of the languages under study in this type of fieldwork, considering first the notion of fieldwork frameworks and the different power dynamics they entail, next the variety of speakers one is most likely to encounter in such situations, and finally the need to reconsider appropriate approaches to elicit data from these speakers.

There would be other issues to consider of course, as, for instance, the ethical issues brought on by the use of video technology and distribution of materials through web sites, complex issues that deserve to be discussed not just before but also during and after the actual production of the documentation, taking ethics as part of the on-going process too[21].

In closing, being aware of having given a lot more emphasis to some of the difficulties and challenges of such work, I also want to state clearly something obvious to all of us that have done this work, but maybe harder to put into words or, even worse, down on paper, in spite of being very real. It is the unfathomable human experience that such work provides, with its intellectual excitement and challenges and its intensely nurturing as well as demanding personal relations. I think I can speak for many of us, long-term fieldworkers, recidivists as it were, or even lifers, who did not do it just for a degree or to set ourselves up on a career path, and who have found it to be the best part of our jobs and professional lives. That is why we fieldworkers already working on endangered languages, have welcomed the opportunity to speak of our experiences and add our voices to celebrate the new opportunities that have been opening up recently through new grants and training programs, a chance to reflect on the nature of this work and to participate in making a dream of one or two decades ago happen.

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[21] A basic rule of thumb to think of ethical issues could be the common sense of wondering how we would feel if this was done to us and to our family and close ones, and being aware that in addition in many cultures taking a picture of someone is considered stealing their soul.

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