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When our values conflict with theirs: linguists and community empowerment in Melanesia

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Lise M. Dobrin

1. Endangered language 'research and development' as a moral undertaking

This paper is part of a larger project that attempts to come to terms with a cluster of ethical issues arising out of my fieldwork on the Arapesh languages, which are spoken in the Sepik coastal region of Papua New Guinea (PNG). While the paper focuses on a particular set of experiences I had as an outside linguist carrying out research in these endangered language communities, I believe they are of more general significance inasmuch as the social processes that motivate them can be found throughout the Melanesian cultural area, and perhaps throughout Oceania. Moreover, I suspect that the patterns of relations with outsiders they instantiate are not strictly limited to this region of the world, but may have resonances elsewhere as well. As our disciplinary focus on endangered languages has sharpened, linguists have begun to seriously discuss the ethical issues they find themselves negotiating in their cross-cultural research encounters. The reflections here are offered in the spirit of advancing this discussion about the moral obligations we take on in carrying out fieldwork on endangered languages, especially when we do so while flying a 'documenting endangered languages' flag.

I should point out, however, that even if the issues were limited to Melanesia, the implications for linguistics would still be broad. Although it remains understudied, especially by American linguists, PNG is the world's top linguistic 'megadiversity' country, with 800-plus languages spread thinly over 4 million people (see Skuttnab-Kangas 2000:34-37 for a helpful comparison of several major language diversity surveys). These represent dozens of language families, and perhaps nearly as many isolates. Three-quarters are non-Austronesian languages that represent "about three dozen language families and close to the same number of language isolates" (Ford 1998; Foley 1986, 2000:357). Most are spoken within very small communities; the average language has a speaker base of only 3000 people "distributed over 10-20 villages" (Foley 2000:358). Nearly half of PNG's languages are found in what is known in PNG as the "Momase" region—the four north coast provinces of Morobe, Madang, East Sepik, and Sandaun (also sometimes known by its former name, West Sepik) (Taylor 1981). There are 300 languages in the Sepik-Ramu basin alone (Foley 1986; see also Aikhenvald 2004). But language shift to Tok Pisin is now proceeding in many communities at an alarming pace, fuelled by tendencies indigenous to the cultures in which they are spoken, including the attribution of positive value to cultural elements perceived as foreign (see especially Kulick 1992 on the ideological underpinnings of language shift in the Sepik, and Foley, this volume). Margaret Mead's designation "an importing culture" (Mead 1938) applies not just to the Arapesh among whom I did fieldwork; it would be apt for many other Melanesian societies as well. This is nowhere

more true than in the Sepik region, which alone accounts for a quarter of PNG's languages and is arguably the most linguistically dense area in the world.

The argument I wish to make is that language documentation projects may mean something quite different to the community of speakers than they do to outside linguists, and that we need to take those differences seriously and respond to them as an integral aspect of our work. If we do not, we run the risk of trampling the interests of some of the world's most marginalised people, people who make our work possible and meaningful, and who we hope will one day be among its beneficiaries. There is only tragedy in carrying our immediate documentation tasks to completion if in so doing we reinforce the very forces of global disenfranchisement that lead to their urgency in the first place (see also Silverstein 1998).

My motivation to address these issues is driven by a sense of unease that has grown for me over the past several years as I have tried to understand my responsibilities to the people I worked with in New Guinea in light of an endangered language discourse that is centered to great extent on Native American cultural contexts and that is firmly rooted in our anxieties about our own western privilege and power. We are increasingly aware that linguistic field projects require cultural sensitivity if they are to succeed, and one important way in which we have shown such sensitivity while trying to minimise the effects of our power is by respecting many communities' wishes to do things as much as possible on their own. Projects in which endangered language communities are empowered to carry out their own documentation work are more and more common, and perhaps even seen as an emerging ideal in the field (Cameron et al., 1992, 1993; Craig 1993; Battiste and Henderson 2000). Surely, we reason, the people themselves must know best what is appropriate in their communities, and just the fact of engaging in this kind of activity can strengthen the sense of positive linguistic and social identity that leads people quite naturally to an embrace of the vernacular. What better way to respect a community's autonomy than to empower its members to carry out their own language documentation, do their own community organising and fundraising, run their own language classes, guide their own materials development, and so on?

This approach is also consistent with the now widespread view that endangered language 'research and development' is not only (or even primarily) about preserving information for the benefit of linguistic science; it is also about recognising the interests of globally peripheral and disempowered peoples—in short, it is a form of human rights activism (see also Matras, this volume). Framed in such a way, one of the purposes of our work on endangered languages is to help people buck off the powerful global forces that make their choices of code not really as voluntary as they superficially appear, but instead quite coerced. The book *Vanishing Voices*, an extended argument for the preservation of endangered languages accessibly written from a synthetic human ecological perspective, very clearly offers just such a moral and political view. As the authors put it, "people should be given control over their environments at the local level to the greatest extent possible.... The right of people to exist, to practice and reproduce their own language and culture, should be inalienable" (Nettle and Romaine 2000:172-3).

So for many linguists, linguistic documentation is a moral and political responsibility. Not that this is true for all linguists: over a dozen years ago, just as language endangerment was emerging as a problem that the field of linguistics was moving to adopt as a prominent part of its agenda, Peter Ladefoged put forward a bold statement of skepticism, arguing that endangered language preservation was an inappropriate professional goal since it involves what is fundamentally a personal and political matter (Ladefoged 1992). The rapidity with which Ladefoged's argument was dismissed would be well worth revisiting, as it strikes me as marking a pivotal moment in the history of the discipline. Whether 'saving' endangered languages (in any of the various forms that takes) is something any of us *can* do, it is clearly something many western linguists feel they should at least *try* to do. Looking at the activity of the Linguistic Society of America's Committee on Endangered Languages and Their Protection, the large number of publications dealing with the topic, and the increased available grant funding for endangered language research and development, it appears that we are not, as a field, ideologically prepared to accept the proposition that "linguistic social work" is a "hopeless cause" (Newmann 2000:6). We want to see the world's languages survive, and we want to see their marginalised and disempowered speakers thrive. After all, as Nancy Dorian pointed out in her poignant and definitive response to Ladefoged (Dorian 1993), even if the current speakers are not desperately grateful for the work we do on their language, we will at least have done something for their descendants in the event that their interest in their ancestral language should later be awakened. Others feel the need to be taking on rather a bit more than the traditional responsibilities of recording data and writing grammars. They apply their professional skills to the development of user-friendly orthographies, the support of vernacular schooling, increasing awareness of how our professional discourse affects endangered language speakers, and so on, all in the interest of maintaining the languages' spoken viability and their speakers' cultural identity. But as a moral rock bottom, I think all linguists would agree that their work should not *itself* contribute to the very marginalisation that so concerns us as a violation of people's rights to be who they are and speak as they do. There is little point in achieving our own scientific goals and providing resources for future generations of endangered language communities if in doing so we disregard the situation and interests of the current one. Yet it is precisely this issue, how to avoid being part of the larger problem, that I find myself struggling with in my work in Papua New Guinea.

2. The involvement of outsiders from a Melanesian moral perspective

In PNG, as in many other parts of the world, white foreign visitors attract a great deal of attention as a result of the wealth, power, and privilege they are felt to represent. Given our anxieties about such troubling neo-colonial power asymmetries, we are often at pains to try to neutralise them and reconstruct our rapport with local people in more egalitarian terms by giving them the skills, tools, and autonomy to do the linguistic work on their own. In this, linguists are not alone; it is a standard mission, development agency, and NGO position that projects should ideally be designed as self-supporting
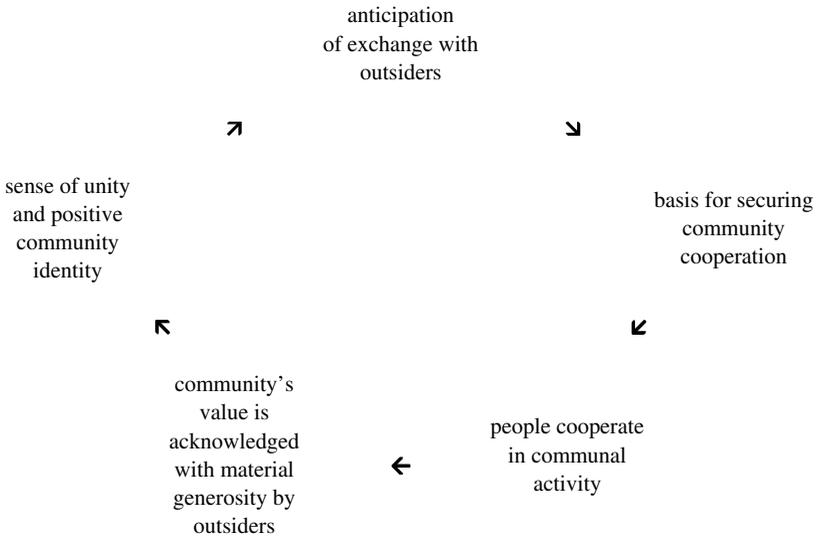
local initiatives, justifying only an advisory, project-seeding role for outsiders. An excellent illustration of this approach to linguistic "development" projects can be found in the manual *Working Together for Literacy*, which proposes a method for implementing third-world literacy programs with "very little help[, money, and expertise] from outside of the community" (Stringer and Faraclas 1987:9; see also Smith 1992:120).

But for outsiders to distance themselves in this way certainly does not make the underlying power asymmetries go away, and in PNG, I would argue, it can even make things worse. Papua New Guineans understand perfectly well that they are at the bottom of the global scale, in what they sometimes call the world's "last place." It is precisely this negative self-consciousness that so energises the rampant shift to Tok Pisin, even in villages that are geographically isolated and traditionally multilingual. But to Papua New Guineans, what is most troubling about others' superior power and privilege is not the fact that they have it, but their failure to acknowledge the material reciprocation it should entail. Whereas well-meaning westerners are often at pains to avoid imposing, especially on people they think of as poor, in New Guinea such distance is interpreted as a disdainful aloofness, one which leads people to draw negative inferences about their own moral worth (Bashkow in press; Leavitt 1995, 2000). From a Melanesian perspective in which not independence but rather relationality is the supreme cultural virtue (see Robbins 2004, Foley, this volume), the morally responsible expression of power is not to try to minimise it, but to show solicitude and care for those who have less of it through participation in a continuing relationship of interested engagement and generous "helping" (a direct translation of the widely used indigenous terms) that has material reciprocation as its moral and emotional focus. In New Guinea societies the exchange of material objects is the main medium of social relations. So while it may appear to outsiders that the local people are "always asking you for things," in many ways it is the relations those things signal that are people's primary goal. (You see this prioritising of the relationship over the object exchanged all the time in New Guinea when you give people something they have asked you for, and then they turn right around and give it away). In effect, the ability to elicit exchange itself constitutes empowerment and forms the basis for establishing self-worth (see, e.g., Munn 1988, Strathern 1988, Schieffelin 1990).

The value Melanesians place on exchange with outsiders is also promoted by the highly egalitarian and autonomistic ethos of their societies, where individuals' unwillingness to subordinate their interests in the service of communal goals is widely felt to be an endemic social ill. In this context, the elicitation of material value from distant others reflects positively on a community's moral standing and confirms the authority of its leaders, who find the evidence of outsiders' engagement an effective means of persuading others to unify behind them in communal endeavors (see Figure 1). For this reason too, foreign involvement is not resented but in fact highly prized, and foreign disengagement is literally disempowering, because it undermines the fragile condition of unity that communities strive for but find difficult to achieve, and that community level projects require in order to succeed.

So while the idea that the interests of outsiders should be imposed only minimally may be highly resonant to most western linguists, for whom respecting a community's autonomy is of paramount value, it is at odds with the perspective of PNG villagers, for whom foreign-sponsored research and development projects of all kinds are often valued precisely *because of* the exchange relationships they bring with the outsiders who promote them. This applies to linguistic projects as well, whether their aim is community literacy, language revitalisation, Bible translation, or language documentation. Language is in fact one of a handful of common areas in which the potential for outside interest has come to be taken for granted, given New Guinea villagers' long experience with missionary linguistics, particularly through the SIL, and through contact with an outside world in which only a handful of languages appear to be spoken. It is this, above all, that the Papua New Guineans I knew found truly empowering about my work: the fact that through it they were brought into just such an exchange relationship with a powerful outsider—a linguist—me.

Figure 1: The Melanesian ideal: community engagement elicits continued exchange with outsiders

anticipation
of exchange with
outsiders

↗   ↘

sense of unity
and positive
community
identity

basis for securing
community
cooperation

↖   ↙

community's
value is
acknowledged
with material
generosity by
outsiders

←

people cooperate
in communal
activity

3. My Arapesh fieldwork from a Melanesian moral perspective

When I arrived in my village field site to "learn the language and write it down in a book," I was trained well enough as a linguist, but I was disoriented to find that the language I had traveled all that way to study was obsolescing so dramatically. In the

mountaintop village where I lived, the linguistic medium of everyday life is now Tok Pisin, the PNG creole lingua franca. The youngest good vernacular speakers are all above forty, and many children can not understand the simplest everyday commands and greetings, putting the language on the verge of 'seriously endangered' according to the schema in Wurm 1998. I could appreciate that villagers were distressed about the declining state of their language, but I was culturally unprepared to accept the power to save it that people systematically attributed to me. It was announced in a speech made by an elder upon my arrival that the vernacular would now experience a renaissance. After I had been living among the villagers for a while, I was told that it was a privilege to have me "ornamenting" the village, and that people in neighboring villages envied them because of it. My interlocutors occasionally pointed out that they were speaking Arapesh again simply due to my presence. It was hard to know how to respond. Who was I to have such power?

One of the reasons the village had been such an attractive fieldsite for me was the exceptional interest the community showed in their language, as evidenced in part by the work they put into their vernacular language preschool, which was hailed throughout the region as a resounding success. I hesitated to get involved in the school; after all, it appeared to be functioning well without my intervention, and wasn't that the whole point? When I eventually came to understand that the school was in many ways a performance put on for the benefit of outsiders like myself, I was baffled, but I have since concluded that by hanging back I missed an opportunity. The performance was an effort to demonstrate the village's worthiness and to attract outside interest - precisely the condition which would sustain such a community-wide undertaking and enable the school to succeed. It was this, I now believe, that constituted the true significance of all the awkward power-ascribing comments I heard in the village: as an outsider showing interest and engaging with them, I gave the villagers hope that they might find it possible to unify and achieve their communal goals.

The constructive power I held as an outsider was reflected not only in what people said to me, but also what they did. My transitions in and out of the village were a major focus of ceremonial activity during my fieldwork, and apart from a couple of church-related events, it was only the arrival of my husband after six months and then our departure together almost a year later that occasioned traditional dances. Such dances have always been political events concerned with a community's self-presentation, albeit formerly to others from the same region (Dobrin and Bashkow in press, Mead 1938). Given the great moral value Melanesian societies place on social unity, engaging in coordinated activity like traditional dancing gives people the feeling of being at their cultural best. Dances have associated color schemes, decorative paraphernalia, and so on, giving the dancers a uniform appearance; people arrange themselves physically in evenly spaced circles or straight lines, and their movements are all synchronised. This kind of social alignment is a remarkable and highly valued achievement in New Guinea. So when my husband's arrival was delayed for a day due to a transportation glitch, the dance the villagers had planned as a welcome was held in any case. When we finally arrived the next afternoon, they kindly offered a subdued replay for our benefit, but the report we heard later was that the night before, the village

had been "on fire." Before the dance, my husband was also greeted with a terrifying mock ambush accompanied by the accusation that he had come to steal one of their women ("So it's for a woman that you've come!"). By constructing him in this way as a hard-won in-law, one converted in the moment of greeting from enemy to a category of kin that is associated with expectations of mutual helping, the villagers expressed their desire that they not lose a daughter, but gain a son, and the foundation was laid for yet another potentially productive pathway of exchange with someone from outside.

The farewell feast the village held the night before we left was much more extravagant. In New Guinea people often try to make a dramatic impression on those who are about to take leave, to load them up with memories and debt in the hopes that the relationship will continue despite the distance and passage of time. I was showered with valuable gifts, and the traditional dancing went on energetically until daybreak when we set off for town. For my sake, and for the first time to my witness, the songs were sung in Arapesh. Members of the village diaspora, successful businessmen and prominent politicians living in the PNG capital Port Moresby, returned home for the event at considerable personal expense. Because my exchange relationship with the villagers reflected on the community so positively, they even flew in a newspaper reporter to publicise it. Front page stories subsequently appeared in the weekly magazine inserts of the country's two English language dailies, with the headlines "Close Encounter" with "a foreign researcher who became one of their own," and "Farewell Lise: Thanks for your contribution" (Gare 1999a,b). What is most interesting about these newspaper stories is what they indicate about the villagers' values, also those of the papers' readers. While the articles do mention my linguistic research (reported to involve a student from "Chicago State University" working toward a thesis on "Structure of Endangered Languages"), the emphasis is clearly on my exchange relationships: the material means through which they were carried out ("'She was free... eat anything we ha[d] available in the house…'"), the meaning they held for the villagers ("[W]ithin this mountain community, a sense of satisfaction, pride, and achievement prevailed.... [S]omeone from a far away place had come, lived with them and now [would return] with smiles on her face"), and the prospects of those relationships continuing once I had gone ("For Lise and Ira, there was 'absolutely nothing' they [could] give back in compensation for all the goodness and hospitality provided by the people.... She however promised that the villagers would be 'the first to receive a copy of [the] book' which she intends to publish following this research"). Correspondingly, the large color photographs illustrating these stories depict my husband and me transacting gifts with the villagers as members of the village diaspora look on.

Lest it be thought that this was just an idiosyncracy of my host village, which was admittedly unusual in being able to muster the services of a newspaper reporter, similar features can be identified in the "launching" of the Ilahita Arapesh New Testament, which I witnessed in 1998. The culmination of years of collaboration between Ilahita villagers and an SIL linguist, Bob Conrad, this Bible launching was the largest, most spectacular, and most elaborately orchestrated village ritual I saw in PNG. Among the honored guests were a vanload of ardent mission supporters who had come

from the United States just for the event. Two senior Members of the PNG Parliament were also present. The purpose of the event was ostensibly to celebrate the publication and distribution of a book, a vernacular language Bible. But the launching showed every hallmark of a New Guinea farewell feast put on to ensure that the relationship with a guest from outside would continue into a now uncertain future. And it is at precisely such times that we see the people calling upon their own cultural resources, identifying with them anew and confirming their value in modern contexts. Ilahita elders proudly decorated themselves and displayed their yams at the launching (in the inland Arapesh region yams are the primary food source as well as the focus of a now-waning complex of cultural beliefs and practices that had enormous traditional importance). The occasion even moved the people of Ilahita to bring out the tambaran, the masked spirit figure that was central to the village's secret men's society, which had disbanded some decades earlier as charismatic Christianity took hold (Tuzin 1980, 1997). It is this that Mead was trying to convey with the phrase "an importing culture": not just that the culture incorporates elements that can be traced to outside, but that the traditional culture *itself* is oriented toward relationships with those from outside.

I should make clear that exchange was not the only thing that was important about my work to the Arapesh I knew: well aware that their vernacular was dying, they were truly grateful that I was recording it for future generations. The same can be said of the Ilahita Arapesh Bible: many Ilahita villagers are now devout Christians, and to have the New Testament available in their vernacular was deeply significant for them. But these products find their importance within a system of values that is profoundly different from ours, one which idealises material exchange, relationships of mutual solicitude, and continuing, interested engagement, in many ways inverting our own anxieties about fostering relationships of neo-colonial dependence.

4. What is a good linguist to do?

What, then, is the moral obligation we take on if we seek to carry out language documentation with cultural sensitivity in Melanesia? Clearly, it is not enough to provide language communities with dictionaries, orthographies, or books of legends, the standard products of our work. Nor is it in fact empowering for us to play a merely advisory role on projects we train people to carry out and sustain on their own. We certainly should "make books," even "for people who don't read," and they will assuredly be prized when we do, both for their contents and the esteem they represent (Terrill 2002). But such products can only maintain their value in the context of extended exchange relationships between vernacular language communities and individual linguists—a conclusion that I confess surprises me in sharing more with the missionary model of how to help people than it does with the socially conscious academic one (see e.g., Cahill 2000). Through enduring personal relationships involving earnest solicitude and material generosity, linguists' direct engagement in planning and carrying out linguistic agendas in PNG—including their own—would elicit not resentment but goodwill, and could make a significant impact on language vitality by providing the kind of direct, ongoing assistance that reflects positively on communities' ethnolinguistic identities.

From a Melanesian cultural perspective, what is most valuable about our work is that it brings people into relationships with outsiders who personify money, modernity, and western power, yet who care enough to listen to them, even in their ancestral languages that have such little utility in the world they now find encompassing them. Languages die when they have no speakers, but in Melanesia, part of the reason they die is that they are felt to have no listeners. So for a linguist to consider his or her obligation fulfilled once a documentation project is complete only reinforces the feelings of marginality that impel language shift in the first place. If my relationship with the villagers ends once my project is done and I have 'launched' the grammar, I will have missed the opportunity to give people power in the way *they* value it, within *their* cultural framework. I will have won linguistics' battle to document another language before it dies, but lost linguistics' war over culturally diverse worldviews and linguistic human rights, because I will have dashed people's hopes that, at least in this one context, their globally peripheral voices might actually be heard.

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