

## Language description and “the new paradigm”: What linguists may learn from ethnocinematographers

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The audio-visual documentation of language corpora provides new opportunities for the analysis of languages in their cultural context. For the linguist interested in this endeavour, the integration of sound and video recordings and the recording of linguistic practices raise new questions, not only concerning ethics, but also aesthetics. In this brief contribution, it is argued that the linguistic community involved in language documentation may learn from the knowledge and experience acquired by ethnocinematographers in this respect.

**1. LANGUAGE DESCRIPTION VERSUS LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION.<sup>1</sup>** Descriptive linguistics received a new impetus in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a result of the growing awareness that many unstudied languages were endangered and thus might disappear before having been studied properly. Describing languages in the sense understood in traditional descriptive linguistics means collecting, transcribing, translating, and analyzing linguistic data. But the experience with the description of endangered languages of course had shown that this undertaking was not quite enough to document an endangered language, e.g., for those interested in revitalization. Grammars as abstracted and often idealized analyses of structures do not quite reflect language (“parole”) as a living medium. Whereas in the descriptive tradition statements may be illustrated by one or two examples, the result of language documentation in principle should be a comprehensive record of the essential linguistic practices and traditions characteristic of a given speech community. By definition, this kind of archiving requires various kinds of data. Data collected with the aim of documenting (rather than describing) a language also requires the collecting of information of potential relevance for other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and the study of oral history. As pointed out by Himmelmann (1998:163), this presupposes that the data set contains data and information amenable to the research methodologies of these disciplines. Given the fact that one is often dealing with endangered languages, the speech community itself might also be interested in a record of these linguistic practices.

The linguistic interest in “the new paradigm” during the 1990s coincided with another development, namely in the field of information technology. The latter field had matured enough to allow scholars to create sound and video recordings, and integrate them with text and other explanatory or analytical material. These new multi-media channels thereby

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enabled the interested linguist to also visualize the use of language in its cultural context. Furthermore, these new facilities became affordable to a larger community of scholars. In other words, the “democratization” of these commodities, to borrow a cliché from the social sciences, allowed scholars to integrate these media into their linguistic research projects. But how revolutionary in fact were these new ways of documenting languages? To those familiar with ethnocinematography these innovations in the field of linguistics must have sounded like little more than the reinvention of the wheel.

## 2. THE ETHNOCINEMATOGRAPHIC TRADITION.

**2.1. LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM.** Portraying “the other” probably is as old as the cinematographic tradition itself. The “colonial gaze” of early European cinema resulted in the creation of stereotypes and idealizations of peoples in the colonized regions of Africa, Asia and South-America. But here too, as in other dynamic scientific disciplines, a new type of cinematography developed in the 1960s, not least of all due to pioneers in the field such as the late cinematic griot Jean Rouch. For cinematographers like Tim Asch the main aims of ethnocinematography as a discipline presumably were centered on the study of ritualized systems of non-verbal communication in societies in combination with the investigation of culturally defined conceptual systems. But for the late Jean Rouch, recording language use—whether ritualized or not—probably was a legitimate end in itself. Rouch apparently believed that the camera’s intervention stimulated people to greater spontaneity, expression, and truth without asking them to act as though the camera were not there. His use of ethnofiction as opposed to striving for neutral observation may be said to be, to some extent, revolutionary.

Apart from Rouch’s documentation of discourse among Songhay groups and other African speech communities, there are other brilliant examples of ethnocinematography in the field of African studies, often resulting in an interesting mixture of science and art. The trilogy *Turkana Conversations* by David and Judith MacDougall, released in 1980 and consisting of *A Wife Among Wives*, *Lorang’s Way*, and *Wedding Camels*, represents a first-class documentation and ethnography of speaking among these nomads of northwestern Kenya. After having lived among the Turkana for about eighteen months myself, I could only confirm that the documentation by the MacDougalls of spoken Turkana in its various registers with different social actors was a superior accomplishment from an anthropological and linguistic point of view. Their documentaries contain interesting social drama (in the sense of Turner 1980) among the Turkana, with speech acts ranging from casual to ritualized speech, involving monologues and dialogues, as well as narrative discourse.

Although I published my Turkana grammar after the appearance of the Turkana trilogy by the MacDougalls (Dimmendaal 1983), I only came to know about their brilliant documentaries several years after I had completed my dissertation, at a time when I began to experience the disadvantages of not being acquainted with anthropology in general and ethnocinematography in particular. A deep knowledge about the culture of a speech community is a prerequisite for a proper understanding of its preferred and disfavoured speech acts. Speech as manifested in such documentaries also allows the linguist to investigate pragmatic dimensions of a language in more detail. What would be needed in addition in terms of modern language documentation techniques, apart from a digitized recording,

interlinear analysis, and translation of the data, is an annotation of the recorded data in these documentaries. The contributions to language documentation “avant la lettre” by Jean Lydall (in collaboration with Joanna Head) through documentary filming among the Hamar in Ethiopia have also been quintessential in this respect and should be acknowledged likewise. Jean Lydall documented Hamar speech styles in a brilliant manner in her classic *The Hamar Trilogy* (released in 1996) as well as in a range of other documentary films (discussed below).

As argued by Himmelmann (1998:171) with respect to language documentation techniques, “[i]deally, the person in charge of the compilation speaks the language fluently and knows the cultural and linguistic practices in the speech community very well.” Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall are both known to be fluent in Hamar. But what linguists interested in language documentation could learn from ethnocinematographers of such standing is that there is also an artistic side to the audio-visual recording of speech. The documentary work of the MacDougalls and Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker involved partly new artistic techniques, e.g., the use of running translations rather than voice-overs, which are annoying, not only because of the authorial “voice of God”, but also because they often destroy the expressive and interpersonal dimension of the original text.

Such materials accordingly could easily be used to support more traditional language description as well as anthropological-linguistic research, a procedure characterized as “annotating the documentary corpus” by Woodbury (2003:42). Lydall and Strecker (1979a, 1979b) in fact produced supplementary “annotational” material to their documentaries. As shown in Jean Lydall’s film *Duka’s Dilemma* (2002), Hamar “actors” frequently use ideophones, i.e., expressive words evoking sound-motion pictures which also tend to be accompanied by mimetic movement and facial expressions. Lydall (to appear) presents a beautiful analysis of this important interpersonal, expressive aspect of Hamar speech acts.<sup>2</sup>

From an anthropological-linguistic point of view, the documentary *The Hamar Trilogy* also contains perfect accompanying illustration material for politeness strategies (in the sense of Brown & Levinson 1978) among the Hamar. The monograph by Strecker (1988), *The Social Practice of Symbolization: An Anthropological Analysis*, constitutes a brilliant synthesis of Hamar notions of “face” (i.e., of social identity) and preferred positive-face and negative-face politeness strategies in this pastoral community in southwestern Ethiopia. A digitization of language materials with an interlinearized version (and perhaps a lexicon to which it relates) presumably would be the only additional aspect in terms of language documentation techniques not yet covered by these pioneers of language documentation.

**2.2. THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM.** The linguist’s zest for an investigation of what is systematic (“grammaticalized”) to some extent requires a corpus of language data that differs from the corpus the ethnocinematographer would pre-

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<sup>2</sup> Such documentations have already turned out to be relevant to scholars from other disciplines. Psychologist David McNeill, for example, analyzed the “body language” (kinesis) of key figures in the documentary about the Turkana documentary *Lorang’s Way* in his monograph on gestures (McNeill 1992).

sumably seek out. Thus, from a linguistic point of view repetition may be important "...in order to be able to determine what is "regular" and what is *ad hoc* in a given specimen..." (Himmelmann 1998:183). But what linguists may learn from ethnocinematographic contributions of the type discussed here is that there is also an aesthetic aspect to the video documentation of communicative behavior. Verbal art and speech play as communicative events constitute "...an embodiment of the essence of culture and as such [are] constitutive of what the language-culture-society relationship is all about", as Sherzer (1987:297) put it. Ethnographic filmmaking also appears to have been dominated by technical specialists and cinematic artists whose knowledge of the topic of their films was often limited to a few months of reading and scattered days of consulting with subject matter specialists. But as Ivo Strecker (personal communication) has pointed out, ethnographic film is too serious a thing to be left to filmmakers.

One of the producers of the *Turkana Conversations*, David MacDougall has himself discussed the eye of the film maker from an aesthetic point of view (MacDougall 1984). As an ethnocinematographer, he has defended the so-called "unprivileged camera style," in which the camera takes on the point of view of a spectator. This strategy contrasts with the "privileged style" of a Hollywood-type production; with the latter, one may find oneself as a spectator in the middle of a fire, for example, thereby representing an impossible camera position. In other words, even though the aesthetic aspect—or the dramatic effect for that matter—is important, one should accept the restrictions or limits of normal perception with ethnocinematographic work, since the privileged so-called "Hollywood style" might distract too much from the actual discourse. This, by extension, also holds for language documentation work.

What we may learn in addition from these pioneers in the field, apart from the aesthetic dimension involved in such documentation, is the gender-sensitive nature of creating a corpus of communicative events. Potential contrasts in discourse styles between males and females, for example in traditional Hamar society, are illustrated beautifully in *The Women Who Smile* by Jean Lydall and Joanna Head (1980) versus Ivo Strecker's (1978) documentary *The Leap Across the Cattle*. Although in both films the central focus is on the interests and views of those filmed, there are fascinating differences, for example in that the props used to stimulate particular kinds of communicative events in *The Women Who Smile*, frequently involve questions about topics often associated with female behavior, such as inner feelings. Interestingly, the team involved in the production of this film was also entirely female.

A third (and perhaps the most important) aspect instructive to the linguist interested in doing language documentation involves the interactive dimension between the producer and those filmed, a phenomenon called polyphonic ethnography by Ivo Strecker and others. In different interviews, the late Jean Rouch also made reference to this "cine-trance agreement" of the film makers in front of the camera and the "other producers." The result of such agreements with those behind the camera speaking is not just a pictorial representation of culture or a documentary contributing to anthropological discourse, but also a fascinating piece of art documenting speech styles. It goes without saying that excellent intuitions about semiotic structures are required on behalf of the film makers in this kind of set up. But the documentaries on the ethnography of speaking among the Hamar by Jean

Lydall and Ivo Strecker show that this can be done, and that such strategies may lead to impressive results.

In their documentaries on Hamar culture, Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker registered communicative events representing different degrees of spontaneity, from exclamations during staged events known to the communicating parties and enacted for the purpose of recording, such as interviews and ritual speech. This is the kind of material which those interested in the documentation of the Hamar language presumably would like to see contained in their corpus. Social scientists have criticized the use of staged or semi-staged communicative events; it is claimed that these are enactments of ideologies. But the interviews between, for example, Jean Lydall and female Hamar speakers in *The Hamar Trilogy* reveal thoughts (“ideologies”) about gender issues in a natural, conversational style which otherwise Hamar women presumably would only discuss with their intimate friends.

In order to be able to carry out this kind of anthropological-linguistic research, one needs not only an in-depth knowledge of the language, but also the consent and trust of the community. Whereas some might argue that natural speech is more likely to occur when speakers are not aware that they are being observed—although ethnocinematographers like Rouch would have denied this presumably—there is a problem here of acceptable professional conduct. Taping speech without permission simply is unethical. “Even when permission is granted, researchers must safeguard the confidentiality and well-being of the individual(s) with whom they work”, as I have argued elsewhere (Dimmendaal 2001: 68). Here again, ethnocinematographers like Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker have set an exemplary academic standard by taking such considerations serious.

What appeared to be “a new paradigm” for one scientific discipline, namely descriptive linguistics, thus has been commonplace for a few decades now in a neighbouring field, that of ethnocinematography. Foley (2003) has argued against the rigid “Saussurean dichotomy” between language description and language documentation, which according to him is “...a reflection of linguistics’... own Western ideology of language, as reflected in its cultural practices of normative dictionaries and reference grammars.” Ethnocinematographers like Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker managed to avoid this somewhat ethnocentric pitfall, by not necessarily valuing some text types over others as sources of data, e.g., genres listed by Foley (2003:85-96) such as ritual language over gossip, or narratives over conversations. Instead, in their documentaries they registered what would seem to be the full range of local genre types.<sup>3</sup>

**3. THE NEW CONSUMERS.** The quest for new types of corpus collections emerging in the 1990s primarily in an attempt to help document and, where possible, revitalize endangered languages resulted from a dissatisfaction with traditional grammars, which turned out to be less useful in this respect. From the point of view of the researcher, this new approach to language study of course meant acquiring new documentation technologies. But it also involved new adaptation strategies of a different type, such as making knowledge accessible

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<sup>3</sup> As further pointed out by Foley (2003:86), there has been a parallel discussion in anthropology about the cultural practice of ethnography as an equivalent to the highly idealizing nature of language description; the author also refers to Burridge (1973) for further discussion.

to a wide audience, in particular community members in the case of endangered languages. The importance of a closer interaction between (visual) anthropologists and linguists in such projects is obvious.<sup>4</sup>

A central idea behind the archiving of material on verbal and non-verbal communication of course is that the materials should be made discoverable, accessible and searchable from anywhere with internet access. But publicly accessible storage raises additional questions about the rights of privacy and language rights of individuals and communities contributing to a language documentation project. **For obvious ethical reasons, it is absolutely crucial that communities can express sensitivities or restrictions and thus set limits to documentation by interested parties outside the speech community.** Here, then, are the new consumers, the speech communities and linguists interested in the documentation of verbal and non-verbal communication. And here too we may learn from the rich experience of ethnocinematographers over the past decades.

As pointed out in personal communication with technician Peter Wittenburg of the Max-Planck-Institut für Psycholinguistics (Nijmegen, The Netherlands), the institute archiving material collected within the Volkswagen Program on endangered languages (Do-BeS), clay tablets like those used by the ancient Sumerians probably constitute the best way of archiving linguistic material, when it comes to longevity, as attested by the fact that these oldest linguistic documents have been around for some 4000 years. Unfortunately, clay tablets do not provide us with the sounds of the language, nor do they provide any sort of documentation that can be queried in the way that a film corpus can be. As the second best strategy, digital archives allow for possibilities never before imagined.<sup>5</sup> The next big challenge facing language documentation is the discovery and widespread use of software interfaces that make aesthetically appealing documentation materials that can be easily and flexibly used by a wide range of users, including the speech communities whose endangered languages we want to document.

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<sup>4</sup> The Sorosoro programme in Paris of course is an exemplary case showing how film can be used to support endangered languages (<http://www.fondationchirac.eu/en/sorosoro-so-the-languages-of-the-world-may-prosper/>). A survey of other films in relation to the documentation of endangered languages can be found under <http://www.rnld.org/node/116>.

<sup>5</sup> As pointed out by one reviewer, video will be more readily available on the web, without proprietary systems, once HTML5 is more widely adopted.

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