Beyond time, place, comparability, and searchability: Transdisciplinary apparatus in documentary linguistics

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Introduction: Basic Premises

- Documentary Linguistics produces results (a “Language Documentation”, Himmelmann 1998) that are explicitly open to and useable by a general audience and across the disciplines.

- I consider the usability of a language archive by “philologists 500 years from now” (Woodbury 2003) as a very important aspect of what I do.

- I am very conscious of the preservational character of documentary linguistic (DL) work, which is in this sense destined “for the ages” (Noonan 2005:354) (not primarily validation of current theories => diversity vs. universality).

  - I view DL not as an objective, documentary activity that freezes moments in time, but as an activity that results in an inter- and intracultural communicative act (via the archive and its presentation) across time and/or space (cf. Assmann 2009, Payne 2006).

  - Independent of its presentation I do not view a language archive as filled with observable and analyzable language “specimens” (Himmelmann 1988), but as a meaning generating entity (whose meanings are primarily generated based on the archival context).
Introduction: Basic Premises

- I view DL less as making a record of “X”, and more as an act of “cultural memory” creation (Assmann 2009).
- I view the central achievement of DL as providing a different representation of “language” and “faïte de langue” (Saussure 1916) from a grammatical description (cum dictionary and written texts); a representation that enables experiential engagement with language documents (audio-visual recordings).
- I consider “language” to be a cultural formation that cannot be condensed to a grammatical representation, a formal model, discourse, or analyzed in a sociolinguistic paradigm. [Consider in this light the metaphors: Language(s) are different ways to make the world appear (“shine a light on the world”), to discover the world. Trabant 2003:324]
Question explored in this talk

• What I have been thinking about (consciously and subconsciously) is what would I, as a person interacting with collected language documents from the past, like to know about these documents in order to discern the multiple layers of meaning that I expect to exist therein?

• Partial Answer: Protagonists and agency.
“Meta-Documentation”

• The importance of context has been stressed time and again (e.g. Ashmore 2008, Nathan 2010)
  • Meta-documentation (Austin 2013).
  • “Secret histories” of language documents (Gnerre 2008).
  • Participatory Language Documentation (cf. Linn 2014)
  • Woodbury’s (2011, 2014) framing narrative in a Language Documentation/Archive likened to a museum exhibit or book.
• We are not just documenting, but we are also telling stories.
  • Stressed importance of origin and reflexivity by language documenters (Austin 2013).
Documentary Research on Nalu and Baga Mandori

- Research on Nalu, Atlantic, West Africa was done from 2010-2012 in three trips. Funded by ELDP.
- Research on Baga Mandori 2013-present. 1 trip. Funded by NEH (DEL).
Research Area Close Up
Protagonists

- Collecting data on the speakers based on the language contact questionnaire (Bouquiaux 1976).
  - It is good to have background data on the speakers.
- But it became apparent to me that I am not only interested in “linguistically relevant” information such as “what was the first language he learned”, but in general “where are the people I work with and record coming from”. “Who is that person talking there?”
  - So more often the closed interviews turned into open interviews (unfortunately badly recorded).
  - But these open interviews recorded a wealth of information that I integrated into the “meta-documentation” of the future archives in comments connected to the speakers or the language documents they were involved in.
  - Recording life histories would have been a great addition.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Soccer_Skills</th>
<th>Soccer_Skills_group</th>
<th>Consented</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Consented</td>
<td>She is not a resident of Katoufoua where I recorded her. Rather she has lived with a family member for a long time in order to cure her sickness. Her residence and husband are in Guinea Bissau.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Consented</td>
<td>He said that his involvement with the soccer team is as an assistant coach for the soccer team of Katoufoua, I do not know, if he has any financial benefit from it. That is why I did not include it in the list of professions. He used to be a soccer player in his youth. I should check, if he made any money from that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Consented</td>
<td>Il para bien nato parce qu'il a peur après sa naissance tout son temps à Katoufoua. Seulement il a travers ses voyages qu'il passait des jours ou un moit de quelque part (Xoo77). He was interviewed twice. I had worked with him during the first field work period. The assistant had worked with him during the second field work period and done a new data collection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baccarius</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Consented</td>
<td>The job as a secretary is not officially remunerated. I do not know, if he takes a fee for writing letters on behalf of the population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diasmo</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Nato</td>
<td>Consented</td>
<td>This person was born and brought up in Katoufoua. His father was a Djoka from the Sansalé region. His grandfather moved to Katoufoua and his mother is a Soso from Guinea Bissau.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapaline</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jota</td>
<td>Soso</td>
<td>Djoka</td>
<td>Consented</td>
<td>He said that his involvement with the soccer team is as an assistant coach for the soccer team of Katoufoua, I do not know, if he has any financial benefit from it. That is why I did not include it in the list of professions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Agency

- The speakers, the recorders, the interviewers, and the interviewees do not only fill out documentary linguistic roles (Austin 2013), but follow their own agendas.
  - agents of personal or community interests
  - act in a recording situation that involves a camera
  - act in situations that are in some ways marked as special (Ashmore 2008: induces a performative quality in the event)
  - take the goals of the recorders (research conductors, team members, etc.) into account
  - team members follow their own agendas
Bitonko, Mar 1, 2014: three_stones (00:46:58:12)
Kaback, April 4, 2012: mkissata
Dobali, February 23, 2014
soccer_narrative_001 (IMG_0963)
Integration of agency into archives

- Language documents and contextual narratives are connected. A reader or user of an archive can read them relationally (i.e. side by side).
  - Integrated with or disconnected from the representations of language documents.
  - => Comparability and the relation of documents is not only a digital service feature, but also an editorial decision.
- Language documents can be collected with contextualization of other documents in mind.
The things you cannot see.
Cultural contextual information.
Documentary Linguistic practices as a research method

- Filming, viewing, and discussing of language documents with team and community members to understand more about them and their content. (cf. e.g. Ashmore 2008 on the use of film in such a fashion)
  - Recording of open interviews (a conversation that is aimed at understanding for the researcher) on topics, terms, etc. that appear in the documentation
  - To order, connect, and integrate documents in an archive with the community or team members.
  - Debriefing and discussion of each session with team members and speakers.
This session is similar to the other nightly storytelling sessions. The ladies seemed to enjoy telling stories and came around to ask me if we could record more stories. I have tried to combine p049 and the group around p047.

This is a video session that I recorded at the house of p047 and p049. The session started when they wanted to go for prayer.

I recorded this one day at the house in Kayenquino as p091 wanted to tell me that story. It was an exciting one, the story is a bit repetitive and I thought it best to do the recording inside.

This was a first session for the team to set up a recording situation and conduct a session all on their own.

This is an important recording. It picks up and relates to recordings already made in several ways. At minute 6:00 the narrator starts to talk about the lineage history of Kukokahia. In difference to p055, the talk did not follow the usual pattern; they talked about the people who lived there prior to the arrival of Nato. p055 refused to mention this, according to p052. p052 also mentioned that he was really happy that the guy said this, because it is something. He adds that one can even find the traces of occupation, especially with a system of family (relatives at Baraungu). Figureheads and other pottery can be found there. Later in the recording, when the kids p022 comes back to a comment that was made during the recording of oral history 002 talked about the fact that mac-di will come back. p002 interpreted p052's comment about mac-di coming back as when she was born, mac-di did not exist, then suddenly everybody started to initiate. Then this 'bad' talked away again and will certainly come back. It should be mentioned that they told the narrator in the beginning to speak in Nato, not even in French. I believe this to be the reason for him to change back quickly to Nato at minute 26:00 when he slipped into French. It is also interesting to note that, according to the guys, the person who is throughout the interview. In order to limit his smoking, they started to take this blanket away and p090 is a cigarette for him every once in a while away from the mic. Thus at the beginning of the recording smoking sounds can be heard and later in the recording one can hear the narrator forgetting for his pack in his pockets (which had been taken away to limit the smoking). This recording was made by the team without my presence. The data sheets on the person participating were not collected by the team.
Outlook

- Agency of the protagonists and language documenters are not the only important contextual information, but they are central.

- It is central because I consider language a cultural formation (includes among other things ways of thinking, communication, discourse ethical underpinnings, etc.). I do not consider language to be the different ways of realizing an underlying language capacity. It is as a cultural formation that it can be considered an achievement and a language archive should enable a comprehension why it is so.

  [e.g. as a culturally aware visitor I will, on top of reading about the history and the landmark sights to see, I will also consult a language documentation – not to get communicative pointers – but to look for the landmark sounds (texts, language documents) to hear and the landmark thought patterns to think (in Mahuatl or Mexican Spanish etc.) (Trabant 2008)]

Understanding where the speakers in the language documents are coming from is a first step towards understanding the language(s) they speak as an achievement. This can only be achieved transdisciplinarily with a broad (Humboldtian) understanding of language and language studies.

  {e.g. “How do inhabitants of the northern Guinea coast master the linguistic obfuscation necessary to project the stereotypes they want to project?” This is related to discourse ethical underpinnings (cf. Grice 1975)) and other aspects of a language that are not only preoccupied with structural, discourse, and sociolinguistic analytic questions.]

I think we should enable and value non-analytic (poetic?) experiences with a language and in this way further explore why an individual language should be considered a human achievement beyond its conceptualization as a structural organism/system.

- Life stories

- Debriefing and assessments should be systematized or done habitually as a way to gather contextual data that relates to agency when engaged in creating a “language documentation”
Outlook (contd.)

- Comments and commentaries should not only be limited to general documents framing a set of sessions, but should be considered an integral part of an archive that is guided by editorial procedures and decisions.
- Comments and commentaries can be gathered along lines of exploration determined by the team and the researchers before the backdrop of a “communicative act” across time and space in an effort to understand and present “the foreign”.
  - Note that this includes and necessitates grammatical and structural linguistic analysis and information.
- Language archives are also non-trivial editorial works and should thus be recognized as their own editions (i.e. publications)
- The language documentary practice itself can be a methodology to gain further cultural understanding.
References

THANKYOU!