Fieldwork as exchange: a Chini interpretation of linguist-community relations

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Presentation outline

- Ethical best practice in language documentation
- Determining what community expectations are
- Exchange relations in Melanesia
- The Chini language
- The issue of the colonial legacy
- Expectations of Chini community members
- The role of the research in my fieldwork with the Chini
- Conclusion
- Acknowledgments
Ethics in language documentation

• Best practice in ethics in language documentation?
  – No ‘one size fits all’ model (Rice 2006)
  – ‘Giving back’ is key (Rice 2011)
  – Dominant view of collaboration as the ethically ideal model in language documentation (cf. Dwyer 2010)
  – Minority view that ethics can be relative (Dobrin 2008; Holton 2009)

• And, there’s the closely related issue of what the roles of the researcher and the research itself should be.
How do we know what community expectations are?

- Some suggest that community expectations are knowable through direct negotiation:
  - “Assumptions about what is ethical for a particular field situation are best avoided, especially assumptions on the part of the researcher about what participants want... Distilled to its essence, the ethics of field research entails indigenous people and field researchers mediating each other’s cultural imperatives. This contextualization of ethical principles can only occur through productive mutual negotiation at the local level.” (Dwyer 2006)

- But community expectations may not always be so straightforward or articulate-able that they can be elucidated through direct negotiations (Dobrin & Schwartz ms; Dobrin 2012)
Melanesian morality 101: Exchange relations

- *Exchange*, the giving and receiving of material objects, as fundamental to social relationships in Melanesia
- Human relationships as involving unending reciprocal exchange cycles (Bashkow 2006; Dobrin 2008, inter alia)
- Interdependence – especially with outsiders – valued over independence (Robbins 2004; Dobrin 2008)
Chini

- Ramu language spoken in two remote villages in inland Madang Province
- Endangered: 60 speakers, all in their 40s and older
The inescapable issue of the colonial legacy

• Collaboration proposed as a decolonizing methodology (Dwyer 2010; Leonard & Haynes 2010; Smith 1999)
  – This view presupposes that indigenous people relate to colonial legacies in their respective communities in the same or very similar way(s)
Chini attitudes toward the colonial legacy

• Colonial rule in NE New Guinea:
  – German control 1880s – WW1
  – Australian control through 1975, especially 1949-1975
  – But, there was significant local autonomy

• Positive effects on society attributed by the Chini to the colonial powers (esp. Australian)
  – Raised standard of living
  – Reduced violence and fostered harmony between individuals
Chini community expectations

• The basic expectation:
  – That I witness how hard their lives are and see first-hand the work they have to do constructing houses, carving canoes, harvesting sago, subsistence gardening, etc.

• Expectations about material exchange:
  – That I give generously to the community to help them achieve development goals

• Expectations about intellectual exchange:
  – That I share my knowledge of English and of the IPA

• Expectations about the role of the research
  – ?????????
“Laip bilong mipela i hat”

- Chini community members constantly emphasized how I needed to see first-hand how hard their lives are. But why?
Washing sago...

Hunting wild pigs...
One interpretation: the outside researcher as benefactor

• The Chini expect that my presence among them and my witness of their lives will lead to a betterment of their standard of living through exchange – just like they see the Australian colonial government as having effected positive development-oriented change.
“How Tok Pisin came to Andamang village”

- Mbärknŋ akupmichinikaya aŋjingiŋi muwuyiki, ŋjikakŋiŋi aŋjingiŋi makapmichiva, twavingwayi achiriyi kakŋiŋiŋi ŋgvuyi ŋi mbanirknŋ akupmichiva, ŋjiambanŋi ɪvkirŋŋi əŋŋi ŋi mĩŋĩna. Kawarma raŋŋi aku aŋjingiŋi muwuyiva... Aŋi gŋi, na awarma raŋgami kĩgĩ pirkī.

  Anton Mana

- ‘The teachers came to our village and nowadays we receive an education in our own village, and all the little kids, today’s generation, they go to school, and they know how to read and write. The whiteman came to our village. ...Later, we will have the standard of living (lit. ‘we will sit’) like the whiteman.’
Expectations about material exchange

• Requests for high-cost material objects (esp.: an outboard motor)
  – emphasis on the unexpected outcome, the possibility that it may not happen
  – never discussed as a trade, but always accompanied by emphases on the help speakers provide/would provide wrt linguistic fieldwork

• Once I bought an outboard motor for communal use, everything changed.
Expectations about intellectual exchange: English and the IPA

• Phonetically, Chini can be quite challenging:
  – implosive prestopped nasals [pm] and [kŋ]
  – complex (esp. homorganic) onsets

• A watershed moment:
  – <Wãmãtpmi> (phonetically: [wãmãcpmi])

• The IPA as representing “new” knowledge

• Emphasis on the importance of the knowledge of the IPA being given but without steps taken to do so
The role of the research: “Mipela bihainim yu tasol”

- Discussing the role of the research
  - No input from the community on the role of the research
  - Failed attempts at negotiating the role of the research
  - “Mipela bihainim yu tasol”

- One interpretation: linguistic research for the Chini represents an object in my exchange relations with them
Conclusion

• Some communities may construct the research and the role of the outside researcher in ways that have not received enough attention in the conversation on ethics in language documentation.

• In some fieldwork contexts, community expectations are not find out-able through negotiation, it’s an interpretative process that requires deep familiarity with local cultural norms. And it requires a willingness to accept roles for ourselves that we may not be comfortable with.
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