Exchanging Words and Skills: Language Documentation in West Papua

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Table of Contents

Ethical Fieldwork

A More Restrictive Paradigm

Case Study: West Papua
  Background
  The CELD
  The Wamesa Community

In Conclusion
1. Ethical Fieldwork
Ethical Fieldwork

From the LSA’s Ethics Statement (2009):

* “linguists should... respect their [the speech community’s] rights and wishes”.
* These consultants and communities “have the right to control who will have access to the resulting data, with full knowledge of the potential consequences”.
* “Ideal frameworks for interaction with outside researchers vary depending on a community’s particular culture and history.”
* Of particular urgency in settings where “politically dominant languages and cultures simply overwhelm indigenous local languages and cultures, placing them in a condition which can only be described as embattled” (Hale 1992).

Bottom line: Respect the community’s needs and wishes, *whatever they may determine them to be.*
2. A More Restrictive Paradigm
Question 1: Extent of Data Access

- Case 1: the community decides that their best interest lies in restricting access to their language.
- “equates research with taking from the community” (Holton 2009)
  - Reasons may be political, cultural, historical, etc.
- Wilkins (1992) describes one such instance in his work on Mparntwe Arrernte in Alice Springs.
A More Restrictive Paradigm
Wilkins (1992)

- The community chose which variety he would work on.
- They vet all articles before publication.
- Can decide that examples may not be used (ie in a discussion on swearing).
- Can decide who the linguist will work with/veto trips to other communities.
- Certain aspects of the language may be restricted to the researcher/the public at large.
- “As far as they were concerned, language and knowledge are not free to everyone, but are under Aboriginal control.”
A More Restrictive Paradigm

Why would a community decide to limit research?

- Lack of accountability can lead to negative consequences for the community.
  - Inaccuracies, release of secret/sensitive material, etc.
- Bad experiences with previous researchers/journalists.
- Inability of the community to access or benefit from products of research.
- History of exploitation.
- More pressing needs (conflicts of funding, time, etc.)
Question 2: Giving Back

“Academics take and take and take but what do they give back? Possibly a dictionary that will gather dust except for the very few that use them.” (Holton 2009).

- Concrete contributions (see ie Rice 2006).
- Abstract contributions.
3. Case Study: West Papua
Working in West Papua

- In summer 2011 and fall 2012 I undertook fieldwork in West Papua, Indonesia to document Windesi Wamesa.

- **Community support from:**
  - the Center for Endangered Languages Documentation
  - the Wamesa communities in Manokwari, Windesi, and Sombokoro.

- **How to act ethically?**
  - Open access & wide (local/global) dissemination.

- **What can we give back?**
  - Technical knowledge, social prestige, perceived spiritual gain.
Language Background

- Wamesa is a member of the South Halmahera-West New Guinea (SHWNG) branch of Austronesian (Lewis 2009).
- Approximately 8,000 speakers in the south-eastern Bird’s Head of New Guinea (Henning et al. 1991).
- Three main dialects of Wamesa: Windesi, Wondama, and Bintuni.
- Still actively used in villages, but no longer learned by children in urban areas or coastal villages.
  - “threatened”
Ethical Fieldwork

A More Restrictive Paradigm

Case Study: West Papua

In Conclusion

References
History & Political Situation

- Indonesian Papua (West Papua and Papua provinces) were Dutch colonies until the 1960’s, followed by annexation by Indonesia.
- The Dutch sponsored missionary work beginning in the 19th century.
- Indonesian government-sponsored transmigration programs (*transmigrasi*) have brought large numbers of people from elsewhere in Indonesia to coastal Papua.
- The Free Papua Movement (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*) has waged a sometimes-violent independence movement since incorporation into Indonesia.
- Papuan Malay and Indonesian are overtaking local languages in many areas for everyday use.
3.1 The CELD
Established at the State University of Papua (Universitas Negeri Papua; Unipa) in 2009.

The CELD’s mission includes:

- working with speech communities in Indonesian Papua to document their languages and their culture
- training local linguists, students, and experts in state of the art documentation techniques
- supporting teachers, government agencies, artists, and activists in developing and using materials in local languages
- is committed to establishing sustainable structures to access linguistic and anthropological data from all over the world at the State University of Papua” (www.celd-papua.net)
The CELD

- **Status**: Papuan community, not Wamesa language community.
  - Regional, not language-specific.
  - Provide general knowledge of the Papuan situation, not language data.

- **Best interests**: exchange of knowledge; local capacity building; language preservation.
  - Commitment to a ‘shared-knowledge approach’.
The CELD

What do we give back?

- Documentation of endangered languages.
  - “the death of a language and its belonging culture means the loss of a world heritage that we all dearly treasure.”

- Training of local students and community members to conduct their own documentation projects.

- Providing expertise on other areas of linguistics.
  - Donating books, leading seminars, mentoring students.

- Contributing data.
  - Making data on Papuan languages available in Papua.
  - CELD will develop regional archive system in which data of local languages can be stored and archived in the center.
3.2 The Wamesa Community
The Wamesa Community

- Status: Native speakers
- **Best interests:** Sharing and teaching language.
- Speakers were enthusiastic about my project and excited to teach me their language.
- **Motivations:**
  - Pride.
  - Prestige.
  - Religious/spiritual.
The Wamesa Community
Views of Language


“My principle of language is this: God gave it, we share it. We can’t hide what we’ve received. That’s not good. We have to share our knowledge with people.”

-Ibu Marice Karubuy
The Wamesa Community
Views of Language

- Most speakers are highly religious Christians.
- They expressed the view that my project is blessed by God, and that it was God who brought me to them.
- Historically, most contact with westerners has been through missionary(/linguistic) work - positive interactions.
  - Van Balen’s house is still a monument, school still used, etc.
  - Written materials in Wamesa are a bible and hymnbook.
- Language is a gift from God to be shared.
The Wamesa Community

What do we give back?

- Prestige.
- Language materials (dictionary).
- *bawa berkat*: ‘bringing blessings’
- Practical necessities (coffee, tea, sugar, etc.)
- One caveat: social pressure.
The Wamesa Community

This does not obviate the need for informed consent, etc.

- No ‘secret information’ does not mean there won’t be things that get recorded which participants would rather not have made public.
4. In Conclusion
Conclusion

In conducting responsible fieldwork, it is crucial to respect the needs of the community, whatever those may be.

Different communities may have very different ideas of what behaviors constitute respecting their best interest.

A highly ethical course of action in one situation may be highly unethical in another.

Specific cultural context required for interpreting guidelines (Holton 2009; Austin 2013).
Thank you!

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