When repatriation is not ‘giving back’: Evidence from a meeting with the Hua of Papua New Guinea

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Presentation outline

• Main questions

• Ethics in language documentation

• Some cultural values and moral norms in Melanesia

• The Hua language

• Modernizing the documentation of Hua

• A meeting in Rosave
  • The Hua response to repatriation
  • Establishing a more binding relationship
  • Eliciting the linguist

• Conclusion
Main questions

• Is repatriating legacy materials always the correct thing to do? How does repatriation relate to the notion of ‘giving back’?

• What does the world’s moral diversity mean for ethics in language documentation, especially in terms of the role of the outside linguist?
Ethics in language documentation

- Different cultural contexts entail different community expectations about the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Rice 2011)

- ‘Giving back’ as a maxim for ethics in language documentation
  - Repatriation, the giving back of legacy materials, as an archetype

- Some research anecdotes have challenged our assumptions about the universal applicability of certain ethical standards (Dobrin 2008; Holton 2009)
Cultural values and moral norms in Melanesia

- Exchange relations
  - exchange – the giving and receiving of material objects

- Relationality
  - interdependence – especially with powerful outsiders – valued over independence (Robbins 2004; Dobrin 2008, et al.)
  - the ‘supreme cultural virtue’ in Melanesia (Robbins 2004)
  - reciprocal exchange as all the more empowering when it involves others from afar (Dobrin 2008)

- The Melanesian moral philosophy in a nutshell
  - “For Orokaiva, the human condition is to be bound to others by numerous reciprocal obligations of exchange” (Bashkow 2006:76)
Hua

• Papuan language, TNG family
  • Lufa District, Eastern Highlands Province, PNG
  • not endangered (it appears)

• Documented and described by John Haiman
  • spent 17 months among the Hua in the 70s
  • recorded 200+ texts
  • wrote a grammar
June 2012 visit with the Hua

• Main goals:
  • Digitize, modernize, and archive the documentation
  • render the corpus multi-purpose
For linguists...

- A digitized record allows us to ask questions we couldn’t ask before:

  \[
  \text{zarero', to the bole}
  \]

  \[
  \text{rgi' hau-na na ave "Zahimane?!" hi-gana,}
  \]

  \[
  \text{DM 3SG.go up-SS his wife what's he doing? 3SG.say-DS}
  \]

  \[
  \text{biraviti' ai'na,}
  \]

  \[
  \text{out from within that one}
  \]

  \[
  \text{hazaunagate a'mo ona vzahuna}
  \]

  \[
  \text{enchanted woman 3SG.come-SS 3SG.arrive-SS}
  \]

  ‘As he went up to the bole in the tree, his wife wondered “What’s he doing?!”, and that enchanted woman came out from within (the tree).’

  Fitome Kusiri: \textit{The wild woman and the domesticated woman}
For the community...

- Repatriation of legacy materials as:
  - the return of rightfully local cultural property?
  - a potential local archive for the voices of remembered community members who have passed away?
  - a local archive for other (locally-determined) purposes (entertainment, pedagogy, novelty, community pride)?
A meeting in Rosave

- Hua as a ‘special language’
- Hua ‘myth’ of the whiteman
- Getting started: The offer of repatriation
The Hua response to repatriation

- Reaction to hearing a legacy recording:
  - ‘Yes, we’ve heard this kind of story before.’
  - Minimal interest in hearing a second recording

- Reaction to the possibility of repatriation
  - ‘Ok, but what do you want?’
  - ‘That was [Haiman]’s work.’
Establishing a relationship

• Papuan-style induction formalities:
  • Place namesake ‘Kiginase’
  • Adoption into kinship system
  • Elicited promises to return
Eliciting the linguist

- ‘We want to make new recordings’

- The roles of the linguist and the language according to a Hua indigenous definition of ‘giving back’:
  - First relationship with an outsider predicated on the grammatical wealth of Hua
  - Language work as a demonstrated means of building relationships with outsiders
  - Making new recordings indebts outside linguist-cum-newly-inducted community member
  - The first exchange cycle in a long-term partnership is established, and the linguist is expected to give back generously to the community upon return

_Hua oke_ (Hua song)
Conclusion

- Repatriation of legacy materials is not always a culturally-sensitive or relevant way to ‘give back’, a concept which in the Hua case is already defined according to an *indigenous* moral framework and not an outside/western/academic one.

- The world’s moral diversity forces us to re-evaluate assumptions about the universal application of certain ethical principles.
References


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