Collaborative linguistics

Collaboration defined as:
- A mutually beneficial well-defined relationship between two or more parties to achieve common goals.
- The process by which several agencies or organizations make a formal, sustained commitment to accomplish a common mission.
The aim of a language documentation, then, is to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community. (Himmelmann 1998)

For a corpus to be comprehensive, linguists can rely on other linguists/scholars in large research teams

Grad students are “lone wolf” linguists (Austin 2005)
- Often do description more than documentation (see definitions in Himmelmann 1998)
- Seldom participate in collaborative projects
  - Some exceptions: The Iquito (UT Austin) Vures and Vera’a (DOBES) Language Documentation Projects
Collaboration with the language community

- “My initial aims, before I went to visit this community for the first time, were to write a descriptive grammar of the language for my Ph.D. thesis.” (Terrill 2002:210)

- “I thus departed for Nigeria with the immediate goal of studying the perception of foreign sounds and nativization of Hausa borrowing in Nupe and Gwari.” (Hyman 2001:23)

- Failure to establish a partnership with the community may lead to the failure of the overall project
  - Lack of involvement of language speakers
  - Conflicts within the community

=> It is therefore essential to determine a common goal for the linguist and the language community
Swim... or sink?

- We see the grad student documenter as a “lone wolf” linguist who must “swim to success”
  - Adjust to a new life style in the field,
  - Meet his/her academic requirements
  - Document the language on his/her own
  - And find out how to collaborate with the language community

- or sink
  - Overwhelmed
  - Unable to accommodate the language community’s requests
    - Unqualified to write pedagogical materials or to translate the Bible (see Terrill 2002:211)
Our goals in this talk

- Demystify the “swim or sink” approach to fieldwork
  - All it takes is flexibility, perseverance, and an open mind!
- Illustrate how we “swam”
  - Describe our respective (and somewhat disparate) fieldwork experiences
- Identify the common ingredients that made our fieldworks successful
  - Forge a collaborative partnership with the language community
  - Nurture this partnership
Outline

- Language communities
  - Fieldwork sites
  - Typology of speakers (number, fluency)
  - State of endangerment of languages

- Grad students documenters
  - Grad students’ goals
  - Grad students’ backgrounds

- Challenges of Fieldwork
  - Language communities’ attitudes
  - Language communities’ goals
  - Impact on research and researcher
Language communities: Typology
Fieldwork in Vanuatu: Mavea and Lelepa

http://www.wannasurf.com/spot/Australia_Pacific/Vanuatu/map/map_vanuatu-surf-spot-.gif
Language communities

- 2009 Estimated population
  - Mavea: 210
  - Lelepa: 500

- Estimated number of fluent speakers (2009)
  - Mavea: 33
  - Lelepa: 450

- Age range of speakers
  - Mavea: Late 20’s and up
  - Lelepa: All age range
State of Endangerment

Brenzinger et al. (2003)

• F1: Intergenerational language transmission
• F2: Absolute number of speakers
• F3: Proportion of speakers with the total population
• F4: Trends in existing language domains
• F5: Response to new domains and media
• F6: Materials for language education and literacy
• F7: Governmental language policies
• F8: Community members’ attitude towards their own language
• F9: Amount and quality of documentation
# State of Endangerment: Mavea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS</th>
<th>RATING</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The language is no longer transmitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td>33 (+8)</td>
<td>Various level of fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>33 speakers out of a population of ~210.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Limited/dwindling domains (some households, private conversations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>The language is inactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>The language is not used in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F7</td>
<td>5?</td>
<td>“The Republic of Vanuatu shall protect the different local languages . . . offers vernacular-language education in languages with 100 speakers or more”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Few speakers concerned with language loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F9</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>Trilingual dictionary, unpublished descriptive grammar and annotated audio texts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## State of Endangerment: Lelepa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS</th>
<th>RATING</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>The language is actively transmitted in most families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>People become fluent at a young age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>450 speakers out of a population of 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Multilingual parity: language spoken in most domains (home, social interactions, chiefly meetings, traditional ceremonies, not in church).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The language is somewhat active: e.g., words coined for modern items (cars, planes, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Small number of SIL literacy materials, not used in schools nor diffused throughout the community. No stable orthographies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F7</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>Policies of equal support exist but are not currently implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Language seen as an integral part of identity, to be transmitted to future generations. Other languages (Bislama, other Efate languages, English, and French) viewed as threats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Unpublished MA thesis on Possession, 2 hours of annotated texts, a few SIL children books</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Grad students’ background
Grad students’ background

- Valérie: prior to field work (2005-2007)
  - M.A. in theoretical linguistics, including 1 semester of field methods (Uighur)
  - 2 years of Ph.D. course work, including 1 semester of field methods (Ema)
  - Work at LDTC

- Sébastien: prior to field work (2007-2008)
  - 1 year of bridge course work, including 1 semester of field methods (Lelepa)
  - 1 year of M.A. course work
Grad students’ background (cont.)

○ Valérie: prior to field work (2005-2007)
  - Limited knowledge of Vanuatu (book knowledge)
  - No knowledge of Bislama (lingua-franca)
  - No interaction with Mavea speaking community

○ Sébastien: prior to field work (2007-2008)
  - Lives in Vanuatu since 2001
  - Fluent in Bislama
  - Familiarity with Lelepa speaking community since 2001
Grad students’ goals

- Earn a degree
  - A descriptive grammar of Mavea for a Ph.D. dissertation (Valérie)
  - An account of the possessive system of Lelepa for an M.A. thesis (Sébastien)
Challenges of Fieldwork
Mavea: 1\textsuperscript{st} field trip

- **Language community’s attitude towards research**
  - Mildly supportive (host family)
  - Few interested to share knowledge
    - But afraid to interfere with dominating host family
  - Some politely refused to participate

- **Impact on research**
  - Consultant chosen by host family (member of host family)
  - Young, no interest in work despite financial support
  - Difficulty in finding other speakers
  - Few speakers available = Little data
Mavea: 1\textsuperscript{st} field trip (cont.)

- Language community’s attitude towards researcher
  - Suspicious / distant
  - Misunderstood my role

- Impact on researcher
  - Loneliness and despair!
  - Feeling excluded
    - Consultant ~ linguist
    - Community ~ stranger
Language community’s attitude towards research
- Much more support and participation from wider range of members
- More consultants drawn into the research

Impact on research
- More consultants = more reliable and diverse data
Mavea: 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} trips (cont.)

- Language community’s attitude towards researcher: Evolved positively
  - Friendly / welcoming
  - Sharing / affable (not all!)

- Impact on researcher
  - Regained motivation and confidence
  - Family ~ friends
Mavea (cont.)

- **Language community’s goals**
  - Not concerned with language loss
  - No particular documentation needs/desires

- **Impact on research**
  - Try and engaged some members of the community in designing an orthography
  - Bilingual dictionary distributed while on-site
  - Some stories written and circulated while on-site
  - Trilingual dictionary (Mavea-English-Bislama), to be sent to the community thanks to an *Alice Cozzi Heritage Language* grant
Lelepa: 1st short fieldtrips

- Language community’s attitude towards research
  - Excellent assistance from local authorities (chiefs) and the Vanuatu Cultural Center (VCC) local fieldworker
  - A large part of the community not involved but not disapproving, observes from a distance
  - But consultants viewed by the whole community as the “right people to do the job”
Lelepa: 1\textsuperscript{st} short fieldtrips (cont.)

- **Impact on research**
  - Consultants chosen with the assistance of the local Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC) fieldworker
  - Consultants interested and engaged
Lelepa: 1st short fieldtrips (cont.)

- Language community’s attitude towards researcher
  - Most community members welcoming
  - A few seeming defiant, in need of an explanation for the researcher’s presence

- Impact on researcher
  - Comforting
  - More than ever conscious that long fieldtrips were the key
Lelepa: 2nd fieldtrip

- Language community’s attitude towards research
  - Continuous assistance from chiefs and VCC fieldworker = more consultants
  - “Main” consultants becoming increasingly interested and engaged in work

- Impact on research
  - More consultants = more data, more diversity
  - Research reaching “cruise speed”
Lelepa: 2nd fieldtrip (cont.)

- **Language community attitude towards researcher**
  - Welcoming, a gift from God

- **Impact on researcher**
  - Occasional frustrations: informants failing to come to appointments
  - Respect and admiration for speakers who became engaged in the project and who looked at their language with a linguistic point of view
Language community’s goals
- Particular documentation needs:
  - Dictionary
  - Translation of religious texts

Impact on research
- Dictionary: Work in progress
- Translation of religious texts: Suggested by Chiefs, to be discussed with researcher during forthcoming fieldwork
- Community endorsed orthography: Work in progress (required by VCC)
Mavea and Lelepa: gender issues

- Taboo relationship between unmarried men and women
  - Linguist is a man
    - Works with male speakers first
    - Has access to female speakers once considered trustworthy
  - Linguist is a woman
    - Works with male speakers first
    - Exogamous marriage
      - Lucky to have access to female Mavea speakers
Demystifying fieldwork
Demystifying fieldwork

- Clear in our projects that attitude towards researcher and research evolved positively

- Most relevant features of success were/are
  - Time
  - Adjustment (on both sides)
  - And nurtured collaboration
Ingredients for successful collaboration

- Learn to develop and maintain trust
  - Live on site for extended period of time
  - Socialize with the community by taking part in communal or recreational activities
    - Take advantage of a trip to the garden, a fishing trip or the communal building of a house to work on other domains of language use
- Learn to tap into these “natural resources”
  - Fieldwork is not just about recording conversations
- Learn the language
Ingredients for successful collaboration (cont.)

- Be dedicated and supportive beyond linguistic matters
  - Mavea
    - Helped students in local secondary school in English and French
  - Lelepa
    - Gave homework support for kids of the host family
    - Arranged for a Lelepa canoe carver to build a canoe at the VCC
Ingredients for successful collaboration (cont.)

- Create “Extended exchange relationships” (Dobrin 2008)
  - Mavea
    - 11 months of fieldwork out of 3 years
    - Sending/bringing back pictures (of self + family, and of community members), linguistic material
    - Phone calls
  - Lelepa
    - Bringing back pictures, recordings, linguistic material
    - Visit to the fieldwork site for recreational activities (no linguistic goals)
    - Researcher’s family (spouse and children) visit the island, known by the community
Conclusion: Strive to create a win-win situation

- Make your collaboration beneficial to both parties
  - Honor your engagements with the community
    - Don’t promise too much!
  - Be ethically correct! Give back linguistic materials
    - Dictionary: “easiest” to distribute and often considered prestigious (Terrill 2001)
- Will be helpful in the long run if you need to work on other projects in the same area
  - Further research on Lelepa: documentation and description of the language through a Ph.D.
References