

The Tailenders. DVD. Directed by ADELE HORN. 2005; Harriman, NY: New Day Films, 2005.

Reviewed by JOSEPH E. GRIMES, *Cornell University, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, and SIL International*

Media releases from tapes shot for educational purposes can be a valuable teaching tool if they are planned and executed by people with long term, informed involvement with the subject matter. Walt Wolfram's series on the speech of Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, comes to mind (Blanton and Waters 1997; Cloud, et al. 1999; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1997). Others, however, follow a more frequently used but less conscionable pattern: find some people who are different, shoot some footage, and then edit it with a voiceover that leaves the viewers wondering about the subjects.

The Tailenders, shot for public television, strikes me as more like the latter than the former. It shows a group from California, Global Recordings Network (GRN, <http://globalrecordings.net/>), that specializes in producing and distributing parts of the Bible and related Christian teachings in many languages, using audio tape cassette, CD/DVD, radio, and MP3 media. Then it shows GRN members and people from other organizations distributing the media in field locations.

From the point of view of endangered languages and language preservation, readers of *Language Documentation & Conservation* may be intrigued to learn that GRN has an archive of analog and digital audio recordings in over 5,000 speech varieties from all over the world. Some of the digital recordings are available for download.

These recordings may be of interest mainly to phonologists, since most talkers are native speakers of the varieties recorded. For morphology, syntax, and semantics, however, one should step cautiously, because the content is often translated, sometimes in situations where there has not been enough linguistic work done to give confidence in the naturalness of the translation or how well it manages the features of the language. GRN's use of "Tailenders" points to their special interest in speech communities that are among the last for outsiders including linguists to pay attention to. But the archive is there, and it includes some recently extinct and currently endangered varieties.

Beyond that, some of the sequences bother me, because they appear to belittle rather than enlighten.

One such sequence shows some useful innovations. The GRN people want their Tailenders to have access to playback technologies that are sustainable without access to electric mains, because where Tailenders live, there are generally no electrical power outlets. So GRN buys gadgets that do the playback part and rebuilds them so that a hand crank or the sun provides the electricity, or they design something from scratch. They've been doing this for over half a century, while industry is just now getting around to hand-cranked flashlights and radios for emergencies. Their 78-rpm player, made from only a sheet of cardboard, a grommet, and a needle holder, arouses my admiration, not the feeling of strangeness that I got from the video. I don't know many linguists who display that level of ingenuity, but I take off my hat to anybody who has it.

The phonetician in me bristles at pseudophilosophical pronouncements like "every word spoken reverberates through time," variations of which are repeated throughout the

Document URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/1797>

video. Metaphorically speaking, a few utterances do that, and we've all profited from some of them. But universalizing the idea turns it into bad physics, because a word's sound energy is inevitably dissipated by mixing with random noise.

Another point they pick up on should be familiar to all who have really immersed themselves in an unfamiliar language and culture. To express yourself well, you have to learn more than vocabulary and pronunciation and syntax. You have to know the local strategies for communicating.

I refer to another sequence that does finger a weak point in GRN's plan, but the DVD doesn't recognize what the point is. It shows a recordist working with a language consultant on how to get a certain biblical idea across in the language consultant's mother tongue. The recordist, speaking in Spanish, is trying to help the consultant express some things that in Spanish and most other Indo-European languages are conveyed by abstract nouns. The consultant is bilingual in Spanish, and his native Mixteco variety of south central Mexico doesn't make use of abstract nouns. He tries, but can't come up with anything that matches what the recordist is aiming at. One asks how to say "pain"; the other says "we talk about how something hurts us," which is a perfectly valid way to talk about pain. From the way the consultant responds, it is clear that his language is one of the many that express abstractions using verbs with their arguments (something hurts us) in preference to nouns that have no arguments with them (pain). I have the good fortune to have stumbled through learning to speak two such languages myself, so the switch in conceptualization leaps to my attention.

But the DVD leaves it as if the recordist and the consultant are stuck. I wish one of them had training in how to bridge the gap. (My strategy is to probe for the interpersonal scenario behind the abstraction, then talk through that, paying special attention to the verbs used.) Perhaps in the future, recordists can be more thoroughly oriented to managing such linguistic quirks. A similar problem the DVD notes relating to objective versus subjective genitives is also readily manageable once one recognizes the difference.

There's a curious bit of problematic logic that comes up several times in the presentation. From the DVD case:

The Tailenders explores how the media devices and messages introduced by the missionaries play a role in larger socioeconomic transformations, such as the move away from subsistence economies toward cash economies based on agricultural and industrial labor.

It wouldn't hurt to look contrariwise at the situation before taking the writing on the package as gospel. Try this: "Various things lead subsistence people into things like cash economies. Once they're there, they need new ideas in order to cope. Some new ideas may be found in audio recordings." Economic exploitation through money economies isn't a twentieth-century innovation. The silver mines of New Spain, the galleys that moved Rome's trade and armies, and the dark satanic mills of New England are early precursors of toy-making cottage industries in China.

But the kind of message the GRN people put out (I've heard a few of their Spanish materials, and others are available on their Web site) is hardly "Go for the money." It

does address things like “Now that you’re in a money economy, here are some things that may help you handle it.” The narrator’s pontification “where Protestant missionaries go, industrial capitalism follows” isn’t always true. In many parts of the world, capitalism has arrived well in advance of evangelization.

I concentrate on the parts of the DVD that have to do with agricultural Mexico because I’ve lived there for over a decade. I can’t speak for the Solomon Islands and India where the DVD makers also shot footage (though I did notice that in the Solomons it was the church people that were standing up to the loggers). But in rural Mexico, the desire to get more out of life than is offered by subsistence farming draws people to cities, where jobs are scarce and the consequent real poverty means you can’t afford a bus ticket home.

Under those circumstances, we should recognize that economic enslavement has long been alive and well and fueled by billions of dollars. And people are moving away from subsistence economies because most subsistence economies are not a Rousseauian paradise.

Where a large proportion of a speech community adopts a new way of life in a new location, it is impossible to predict from that alone whether they will leave their linguistic heritage behind. The groups I have been in touch with maintain their solidarity far from home rather well. I would expect that some others don’t. But it is possible that the attention given to minority languages by well-meaning people like GRN can help reinforce language maintenance.

REFERENCES

- CLOUD, ELLEN MARIE, BECKY CHILDS, and WALT WOLFRAM. 1999. *Ocracoke speaks: The distinct sounds of the “Hoi Toide” brogue*. Compact disc. Ocracoke Preservation Society and the North Carolina Language and Life Project.
- The Ocracoke brogue: A portrait of Hoi Toider speech*. VHS. Directed by Phyllis Blanton and Karen Waters. 1997. Ocracoke, NC: The Ocracoke Preservation Society.
- WOLFRAM, WALT AND NATALIE SCHILLING-ESTES. 1997. *Hoi Toide on the outer banks: The story of Ocracoke Brogue*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Joseph E. Grimes
joe_grimes@sil.org