

Graduate student documenters: The “swim or sink” approach to fieldwork

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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.**



Collaboration with other researchers

- **The aim of a language documentation, then, is to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community. (Himmelman 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 Himmelman 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



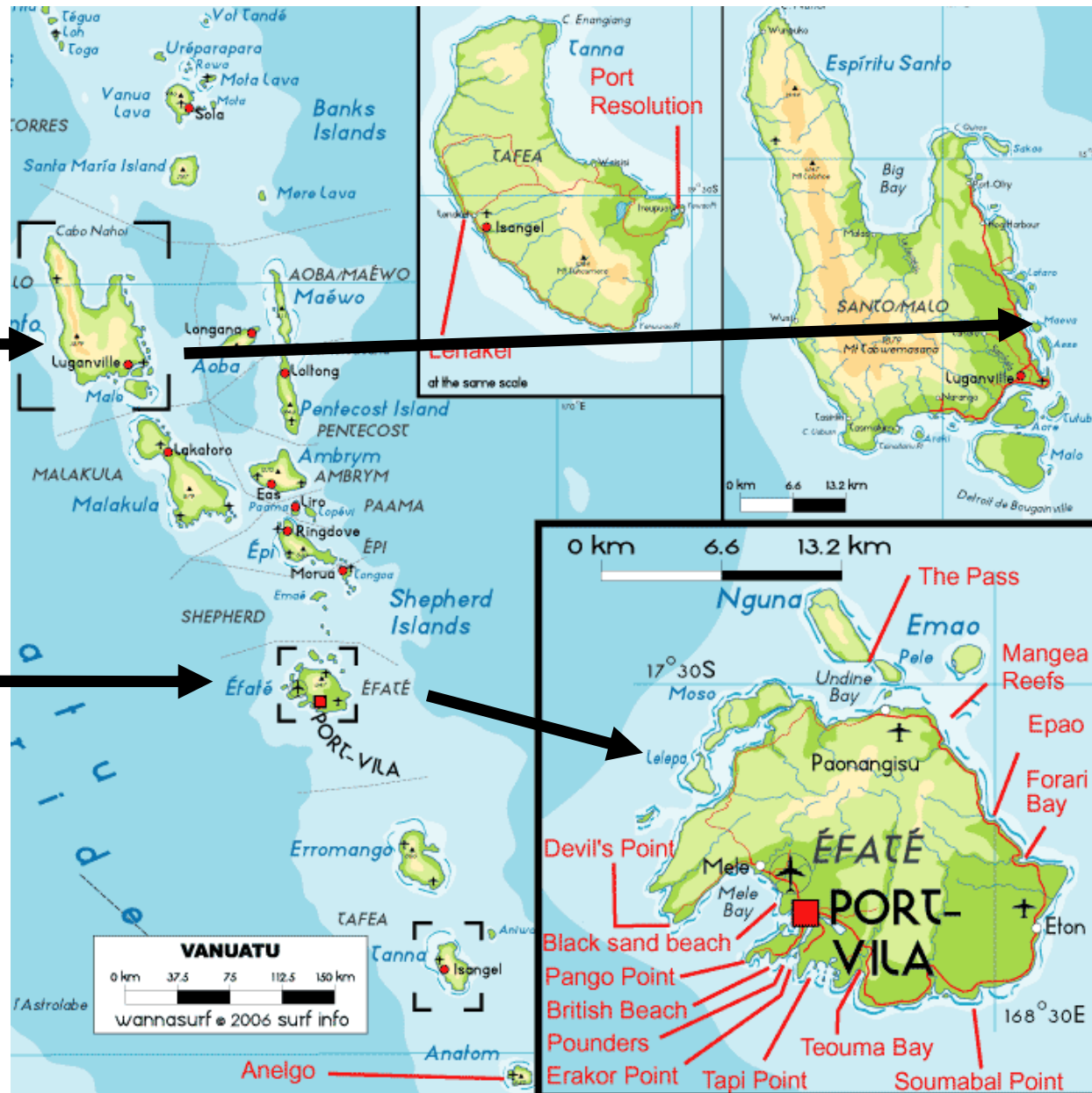
Outline

- **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





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

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F9	1/2	Trilingual dictionary, unpublished descriptive grammar and annotated audio texts

State of Endangerment: Lelepa

FACTORS	RATING	COMMENTS
F1	4	The language is actively transmitted in most families
F2	450	People become fluent at a young age
F3	90%	450 speakers out of a population of 500
F4	4	Multilingual parity: language spoken in most domains (home, social interactions, chiefly meetings, traditional ceremonies, not in church).
F5	2	The language is somewhat active: e.g., words coined for modern items (cars, planes, etc.)
F6	2	Small number of SIL literacy materials, not used in schools nor diffused throughout the community. No stable orthographies.
F7	4/5	Policies of equal support exist but are not currently implemented.
F8	4	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.
F9	2	Unpublished MA thesis on Possession, 2 hours of annotated texts, a few SIL children books



Grad students' background



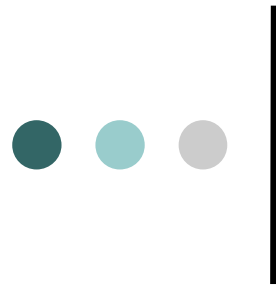
Grad students' background

- **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: 1st 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

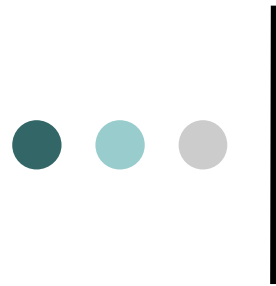
- ● ● | **Mavea: 1st field trip (cont.)**

- **Language community's attitude towards researcher**

- Suspicious / distant
- Misunderstood my role

- **Impact on researcher**

- Loneliness and despair!
- Feeling excluded
 - Consultant ~ linguist
 - Community ~ stranger



Mavea: 2nd and 3rd trips

- **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: 2nd and 3rd 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

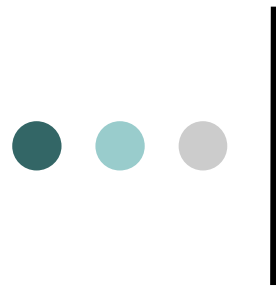
- **Impact on research**

- 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: 1st short fieldtrips (cont.)

○ Impact on research

- Consultants chosen with the assistance of the local Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC) fieldworker
- Consultants interested and engaged



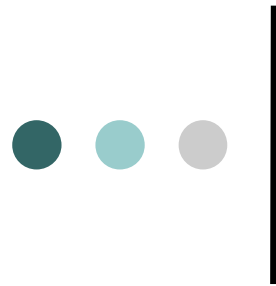
Lelepa: 1st short fieldtrips (cont.)

- **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



● ● ● | **Lelepa: 2nd fieldtrip (cont.)**

○ **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.



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