Linguistic Fieldwork among Speakers of Endangered Languages

Colette Grinevald

3 Linguistic Fieldwork among Speakers of Endangered Languages

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Colette Grinevald was previously Colette Craig. The title of this chapter was suggested to me by Nancy Dorian whom I wish to thank here for her generous sharing of ideas and materials, and whose pioneering work in the field of endangered languages, including its issues of fieldwork, I wish to acknowledge here. I also want to thank Roberto Zavala for all the brainstorming time and effort he invested in the production of the original version of this chapter. While I think of myself simply as a spokesperson for the fieldworker colleagues from various continents with whom I know I share the concerns expressed here (in particular North American, Latin American, European, and Australian colleagues on career tracks parallel to mine over the last decades), I am also sure others could have been more eloquent and I will therefore take full responsibility for the likely awkwardness and roughness of my own statements. What should be clear is that the issues raised here need to be integrated in any public debate on endangered languages in the interests of those who might consider joining in the work.

3.1. Introduction

Beyond being convinced of the importance of documenting the diversity of the world's languages before it is too late, and beyond advocating the involvement of the linguistic scholarly community in the task, it is

important that we also address the various dimensions of the nature of the fieldwork enterprises for such a task. In the wake of a newly orchestrated dedication to carrying out linguistic work on endangered languages, it would seem essential to consider some of the specifics of fieldwork in such circumstances to be taken into account in the planning and carrying out of such field projects. The position taken here is that while linguistic fieldwork is never an easy task, it happens to become, more often than acknowledged, an especially complex endeavour in the particular case of fieldwork on endangered languages. By considering here some aspects of the fieldwork part of the enterprise, the hope is to contribute to what Fishman (1991) has called the need for "intellectualizing" the developing subfields of linguistics that concern themselves with endangered languages, from their documentation and description to their potential revitalization.

The focus here will therefore be on the relation of linguists to the practice of fieldwork on endangered languages, and in particular on some of the psychological, strategic, and methodological dimensions of such types of projects, highlighting certain aspects of the relation between linguists and speakers of endangered languages.

The chapter will consider some essentials of projects dealing with endangered languages, such as the fact that (1) field linguists working on endangered languages today often find themselves involved in field projects of wider scope than just the linguistic description they feel best prepared to handle; (2) the complexity of endangered language field situations means dealing with a multidimensional sense of loss, and diverse and strong language attitudes; and (3) working with the many types of speakers of endangered languages leads to a reconsideration of data-collecting methodologies seldom carried out in field methods courses of linguistics departments. The chapter will close with (4) a case study of such a project with the Rama language of Nicaragua, a Latin American country of the Pacific Rim (cf. Ch. 10, this volume), illustrating some of the major points raised earlier.

It might be worth underlining from the start that much of what will be made explicit here will most likely appear to be no more than common sense to many experienced fieldworkers familiar with this type of field situation and sensitive to their particularities. But it is assumed that, for readers of vital language communities unfamiliar with such situations and curious of them, articulating what some of this common sense consists of, and what it is meant to respond to, is worth putting down in writing.

3.2. Working on Endangered Languages: Linguistic Description at the Core

The field of "endangered languages" has seen a rapid expansion in recent years, and several major syntheses of general aspects of the issue have come out in the last few years (see for instance Grenoble and Whaley 1998; Crystal 2000; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Hagège 2000). Linguists have also started recounting their field experiences (see papers in Newman and Ratliff 2001 and Austin 2003, for instance) as part of a more or less concerted effort at reflecting on the nature of linguistic fieldwork, in particular fieldwork on endangered languages.[1]

It is now fairly common for linguistic fieldworkers working on endangered languages to find themselves involved in a variety of types of projects in which the actual component of the linguistic description of the endangered language is considered as more or less central. As opposed to traditional fieldwork of the past century that by and large was concentrated on the single track enterprise of a linguistic description, today the enterprise of producing a mere linguistic description is often embedded into a wider scope project. And although some academic programmes are now gearing up to handle such challenges,[2] it remains that most field linguists today are more or less prepared to deal with, or embrace such wider scope projects.

This expansion of the scope of many fieldwork situations on endangered languages may actually be more pronounced and widespread in certain parts of the world than in others. It certainly is a common condition of field situations encountered today in the American continent, from its northern to its southern parts (including the Pacific Rim side of the continent, from Alaska and the west coast of Canada and the USA, down along the various Latin American states facing west, such as Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua,

[1] This chapter is one of a series of papers by the author on the theme of fieldwork on endangered languages, in the context of Latin America in particular. Craig (1993) was an early consideration of the ethical issues of such fieldwork, Grinevald (1998, 2000) an earlier discussion of the relation of foreign linguists to national and regional institutions and their linguists, as well as their own academic institutions, and Grinevald (2003*a*) was a brief treatment of the variety of speakers of endangered languages, with an introduction of the notions of fieldwork as an art (as per Wolcott 1995) and of fieldwork frameworks defined by the power relations established between field linguists and the community of speakers of those languages.

[2] Such as the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Academic Program of London started at SOAS in London in the autumn of 2003.

Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, all the way to Chile—Chs. 9–11 and 21–24, this volume).[3]

The point to be made here is that no matter what the expanded scope of most projects on endangered languages today, the linguists will always be the academic researchers primarily responsible for the analysis of the linguistic structure of those languages.

3.2.1. Basic Linguistic Descriptive Work

Basic linguistic descriptive projects are the kind of projects most familiar to field linguists and the ones most easily validated by the linguistic profession. They involve primarily work in synchronic linguistics which typically (ideally) deals with the triad: grammar + texts + dictionary (GTD). Since the linguistic description of the endangered languages will always have to be the most original contribution of the linguists, who are the only professionals trained for this work, this chapter will focus on this admittedly narrow scope but essential and unique contribution of the linguistic profession. It is from this narrower focus that a sketch of some of what there is to think about when doing fieldwork on endangered languages will be considered here. Such a choice of focus is mostly strategic and certainly does not mean to underestimate other goals; it is a reminder not to forget the challenges of basic linguistic fieldwork at the core of all projects.

3.2.2. Language Documentation Projects

For definitions of "language documentation", see for instance Himmelman (1998) and Woodbury (2003). It would seem that the impetus for the development of this new type of field project stems as much from the increasing availability of new documenting and archiving technologies as from an increasing awareness of the rapid loss of much of the linguistic wealth of the world. The two are now thoroughly intertwined, with the technological part receiving perhaps more attention today than the human relations side of the enterprise considered here.

[3] See Grinevald (1997) for an overview of the situation of language endangerment in South America, and the start of a discussion on the possible relations, in that part of the world, of foreign linguists to national linguists and institutions, and to language communities. See also Queixalos and Renault-Lescure (2000) for a thorough introduction to the situation of Amazonian languages today by country, in which Grinevald (2000) is an attempt at articulating the nature of the conflicting pressures put on fieldworkers by their academic ties on the one hand and their commitment to language communities on the other.

Today, the term "language documentation" seems to cover two conceptions of field projects, which may be distinguished by the scope of the enterprise and the relation that holds between language documentation and linguistic description. A narrower scope approach of description-for-documentation may take the form of an edited and annotated version of the field database which has been collected primarily for the production of the traditional triad grammar/texts/dictionary, while a wider scope approach of documentation-for-description means a radically expanded primary data collection, aided by the descriptive activity of linguists but essentially carried out by a multidisciplinary team of fieldworkers (linguists, anthropologists, ethno-botanists, musicologists, historians ...).[4]

The position taken here is that these two approaches should be viewed as successive cycles of a major process, one that naturally starts with an initial documentation that produces an initial description, this description becoming essential for a wider type of documentation, which itself allows for a more sophisticated and more comprehensive description, in ever widening and deepening cycles. Proposals of documentation projects need to be assessed on the basis of what is feasible for a particular situation at a particular time, a more encyclopedic documentation only conceivable on the strength of pre-existing extensive linguistic description, and long-term working relations of the linguist with (members of) the community that have active participation in the project.

3.2.3. Preservation-revitalization Projects

The third type of project in which field linguists working on endangered languages may find themselves involved today is language preservation and revitalization projects, which are, at best, generated and managed by the linguistic communities themselves. See for instance the collection of articles produced by two of the leading North American linguists involved with such projects, and pointedly entitled *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice* (Hinton and Hale 2001).[5]

[4] Nothing will be said here of the newly developing field of archiving, but it is to be kept in full view as a complementary component of all documentation projects today.

[5] Ken Hale, the MIT linguist who helped create summer linguistic institutes for speakers of indigenous languages and trained the first Native American speakers through Ph.D.s in linguistics, and Leanne Hinton, from the University of California at Berkeley, and her Master Apprentice Program for the native languages of California. For a sense of the diversity of ongoing language revitalization programmes in which linguists are involved, see for instance the SSILA newsletter.

As convincingly discussed by Gerdts (1998) and clear from general work on endangered languages by Nettle and Romaine (2000) and Crystal (2000), the role of linguists in the overall dynamics of such projects may need humbling re-evaluation and readjustment, even though, and once again, one must keep in mind that the original and indispensable contribution of linguists remains the analytical study of the language. It may well be that, in such contexts, the most productive approach to the description of the language is one channelled through the training in descriptive linguistics of linguistic community members, for self-sustaining language work of the kind that can be of use to the community. This means that the field linguists double up as linguistics teachers, or are hired actually as full-time teachers and supervisors of linguistic work done by speakers themselves (the WITH and BY fieldwork frameworks mentioned below on p. 44 at n. 9).[6]

3.2.4. Conclusion: Multiple Demands but Language Descriptions at the Core

The main point of this first section was therefore that linguistic fieldwork on endangered languages may well be cast today within more encompassing documentation and revitalization projects, in which case one of the major challenges for the linguistic fieldworker is to manage a demanding balancing act between multiple demands. This issue has been vividly described by Nagy (2000), who describes her fieldwork experience as wearing different "hats", among which are the sociolinguist hat, the theoretical linguist hat, the applied linguist hat, and the "techie" hat, with others yet to be considered. This balancing act may well be in fact one of the major field issues to face for linguists working on endangered languages today.

[6] See the example of Guatemala and the development of a cohort of Mayan native linguists, and the dedication of a field linguist like Nora England to the training of Guatemalan native Mayan linguists: this included contribution to the production of pedagogical material (England 1992*b*, 2001) and the creation of a native linguistic research institute, OKMA. See also Yasugi (2003) for ELPR-financed volumes of linguistic materials based on a questionnaire (that of the Archive of Indigenous Languages of Mexico organized by Swadesh) produced by the linguists of OKMA. The special case of linguistics in Guatemala is described in England (1992*a*, 1997) and Grinevald (2003*b*). The training effort has continued into the creation of CILLA (the Center for the Indigenous Languages of Latin America—N. England director), to provide graduate training for the likes of the indigenous graduates of university programmes in Latin America (for Mayan speakers, the programmes of CIESAS in Mexico, or of the Landivar and San Carlos Universities of Guatemala).

3.3. Issues Embedded in the Complex Situations of Fieldwork on Endangered Languages

Unlike other disciplines relying on fieldwork, such as anthropology, ethnology, or sociology, linguistics has not had a tradition of discussing much the phenomenon of fieldwork. What is generally lacking is an addition to the standard course on "field methods" with some discussion of the wider context of doing "fieldwork". This becomes crucial when one is heading for fieldwork in the midst of endangered language communities, with all the specific extra complications such projects may entail. Among the themes that could be raised in such fieldwork sessions, three will be considered below: the importance of grasping the dynamics of a fieldwork project in a time line, from past through the present to the future; understanding and anticipating having to deal with various forms of loss sometimes in unexpected and powerful ways; and the need to cope with the sometimes insidious impact of particular language attitudes on even the simplest linguistic elicitation sessions.

3.3.1. Considering Fieldwork in Time Line: Past–present–future

This is a basic issue to always take into consideration when doing fieldwork, but one that is not very familiar to linguists: to become aware of the community's past experience with linguistically oriented outsiders, of its present concerns and activities about the language, and to work for some possible continuation of the work in the future by the community itself or other outsiders on other projects.

3.3.1.1. Past

With respect to the past, the issue is that one may or may not be the first one in the field. Earlier on, when fieldwork was basically a very individual enterprise and field linguists were very scarce, basic attention to this issue consisted in checking whether another academic had already done or was still doing fieldwork at the same site.[7] Today, it is best to assume that communities have already had experience with any number of development projects, including some dealing with the language in some fashion. The community's memory of our predecessor(s) has potentially either a positive or a negative

[7] In the case of Latin America one factor considered in the choice of site was and remains to a great extent the established presence of missionary Bible translator linguists, for instance.

impact. It can actually take a while to figure out, as communities often do not share that information at first with new outsiders, particularly when negative feelings linger on.

3.3.1.2. Present

One needs to assess the level of vitality of the language, which is not a simple endeavour, if one considers all the variables judged important (as spelled out in UNESCO 2003). This includes evaluating the level of ethnic consciousness of the community and the level of politicization of its relation to the language. All field projects can benefit from such an assessment, to better evaluate the desirability and feasibility of description and documentation, as well as revitalization efforts. As will be seen below in § 3.4 on speakers of situations of endangered languages, defining the linguistic community of such languages and simply counting its members is already a challenge.

3.3.1.3. Future

In the case of work on endangered languages, it is important to consider how one may be the one and only, and, crucially, the last one to work on that particular language. If one is to be the one and last linguist to work on an endangered language, and one should always assume so, it means that the data one will be collecting may well be all that there will be of documentation of the language, unless some native people can be trained to continue collecting material after the departure of the field linguists. Therefore, as spelled out by Mithun (2001), a major issue to keep in mind in collecting data is that one cannot tell what will be of theoretical interest later in the field of linguistics, which means that one becomes accountable for collecting all the data one can, even data in which one may not be personally interested because of one's own theoretical leaning and interests.

A future perspective in terms of the community also means considering the sustainability of the work done on the language, through empowerment of members of the community, particularly in the form of continued training of speakers and semi-speakers capable and interested, and participation and support to the production of language materials, with a view to producing material that is actually usable in the field and by the community.[8]

[8] This author can be critical of too much effort, energy, and funding being spent on the production of technologically highly sophisticated materials of no use at all to communities, in plain truth, for lack of access to electricity, or computers, or computers with the kind of memory capacities required by programmes first world academics have created, or simply for lack of able bodies to be trained locally in using them.

Such concerns are now integrated in ongoing discussions of what has been labelled as "good practice", including legal, ethical, and practical issues in a sociopolitical context of support to sustainable community development.[9]

3.3.2. Dealing with Loss

Working on endangered languages has another dimension rarely mentioned in the literature: that it means dealing with ongoing loss. The notion of loss is pervasive in fieldwork on endangered languages, both in a practical and in a psychological, or even an emotional sense. The sense of loss may take many shapes, all with some impact on the experience of fieldwork. This makes the work essentially different from fieldwork in dominant language communities where language is everywhere, choice of speakers is wide open, participant observation is easy to come by, and attitude of speakers toward their language is one of relative confidence. There are losses that have to do with the language to be studied itself, and others that are more tied to the persons of the speakers.

3.3.2.1. Loss of Natural Context for Language Learning and Participant Observation

The loss of varieties of language due to the loss of contexts of use, which is the other side of the phenomenon of "language shift", means fewer opportunities to capture the language in its various forms. It becomes from difficult, to impossible, to record certain varieties in their natural settings, since, by definition, fewer children are learning it—if any at all—fewer elders are passing on the traditional culture, fewer ceremonies are performed so that fewer traditional performing arts can be documented.

The loss of the critical mass of speakers necessary to maintain a vital linguistic community translates into less of a chance to observe the language in use, to hear it in its natural use, to learn it by immersion, to practise it. In general, there are fewer opportunities, often no more opportunities, for the last speakers to gather, certainly no more traditional night gatherings typical of winter nights in many places.

[9] The notion of "good practice" corresponds to the "empowerment'" framwork discussed in Cameron et al. (1992), who summarized the progression of fieldwork frameworks in the course of the second half of the 20th century in the formula of fieldwork having been earlier ON a language, then later ON a language and FOR the community, to develop into fieldwork ON a language and WITH the community, where these frameworks are labelled the "ethical", "advocacy", and "empowerment" frameworks, respectively. Actually a further model of work ON a language but BY the community is the one requested by more and more indigenous communities today, in America at least, as discussed in Grinevald (2000, 2003*a*).

3.3.2.2. Loss of a Sense of Norm, and Increased Variation in the Language

These are losses typical of those situations that linguists can be very sensitive to. Normally oral tradition languages naturally function with a certain amount of variation that is already hard to handle for linguists, who come from normative language traditions and have been raised in linguistic traditions that primarily consider data of standardized long written tradition languages. But in the case of language obsolescence an additional layer of variation pervades everything: it is the variation caused by the lack of norm enforcement from lack of vitality of the speaker community.[10]

3.3.2.3. Loss of Choice of Speakers

The limitations are obvious when there are few speakers left, and among them older people with physical ailments, although the limitation in number is often compensated by the fact that some of those last speakers are extremely attached to their language, eager to work with a linguist, and excellent speakers. One can evoke for instance the talent of the extraordinary California Yahi man they called Ishi, the last survivor of his tribe and last speaker of his language, who was the unique source of a very rich documentation of his language and culture (Kroeber 1961). Working with as many of the last speakers as possible can help piece together what is left of the language and the knowledge it conveys. It has often been observed that what remains of knowledge of a language can be distributed across speakers, so that it might take working with multiple semi-speakers to complete the study of some aspect of the language.

3.3.2.4. Loss of Linguistic Confidence of Certain Types of Speakers

This is a major characteristic trait of the semi-speakers of very endangered languages, as will be considered below in the section on types of speakers of endangered languages. This type of loss has a direct impact on the conduct of elicitation sessions, as it becomes obvious that simple questions may trigger renewed sense of loss, of shame, or confusion in the speakers.

3.3.2.5. Loss of Speakers Retold

It is probably worth mentioning another aspect of the sense of loss likely to shock the unprepared fieldworker. It is the possible traumatic catharsis

[10] For a discussion of the nature of the multidimensional linguistic variation inherent to such a situation of endangered languages, see Dorian (1982, 1986, 2001 in particular).

effect of asking last speakers of some language for some personal narratives, and of hearing tales of decimation of their people. One can think of the haunting voice of Ishi recorded on wax cylinders telling the story of the successive massacres that decimated his people. Such an experience can still happen today, as happened, for instance, on several occasions during the campaign for the "normalization" of the alphabets of the Amazonian languages of Bolivia in 1995 and 1996, when several groups of speakers of seriously endangered languages recalled from living memory episodes of the decimation of their people. This is not what graduate students in linguistics usually expect to hear when they ask for a simple personal narrative from native speakers in order to have textual material to study the basic morpho-syntax of the language.

3.3.2.6. Loss of the Speakers

And there is always the ongoing loss of the old speakers to whom the linguists had become attached as if they were family members, and on whom they were dependent in order to learn about the language. There are common cases of plain mourning one must deal with, but there is also the added dimension for linguists of mourning the death of the language itself. And before the actual death of the old speakers and of their languages with them, there may be painful dealings with the loss of memory or language ability that can accompany old age and ill health.

3.3.2.7. Conclusion: a Pervasive Sense of Loss

There is therefore a high likelihood, during fieldwork on endangered languages, of being confronted at some point or another with any combination of these feelings of loss. They may be diffuse enough for us not to be able to put labels on them but their accumulation definitely gives to this kind of fieldwork a very different personal dimension. These feelings of loss can be acute and dramatic when speakers die, but also when our questioning and listening to some of them gives them an opportunity to express the depth of some of their own emotions about it, making us direct witnesses of the human and personal tragedy of language death in some parts of the world.

3.3.3. Dealing with Language Attitudes

Actually one always has to deal with language attitudes when working on languages, but these attitudes are not always easy to identify either. In speakers of dominant languages they tend to be a cluster of pride in the language

and quiet personal assurance of its value and claimed superiority. But with speakers of un-empowered languages, including those of endangered languages, the attitudes are often very mixed: negative attitudes absorbed from the dominant culture that can lead to serious alienation, combined with often hidden positive attitudes that underlie a strong need to identify with that language. Maintenance and revitalization projects must take into account these attitudes because it is clear that they determine, more than scientific studies and modern technologies, the quality of the documentation and the ultimate fate of the language. Dealing with language attitudes can take many forms.

3.3.3.1. Helping Revalorize the Language and the Speakers

Linguists contribute to the revalorization of the language itself, by their own scientific work, the proof that the language can be written, is worth studying and is rich in grammar and vocabulary. This revalorization of the language must be addressed both to the community members themselves and to the members of the dominant culture. But revalorization of a language must also pass through the conscious revalorization of its last speakers. Language endangerment created by language shift creates a varied population of speakers with different levels of bilingualism and degrees of alienation to the dominant culture and to their own language and culture. In such situations, a discriminatory attitude is common toward the last speakers of an endangered language, often seen as backward, if not primitive, partly for speaking a denigrated language. If they work with linguists, these speakers can additionally be considered as traitors to the community, accused of selling a good that belongs to the community, even when the community has very mixed feelings about that good. Such contradictory attitudes of non-speakers in a love-hate relation to the language are a disturbing and frustrating attitude for the Cartesian minds of most linguists.

3.3.3.2. Dealing with Normative Attitudes of Language Activists

Another aspect of language attitudes that linguists have to deal with is the double challenge of handling the natural variation of the data collected in situations of endangered languages while being confronted with the extreme normative attitudes of some of the leaders of the revitalization projects. Those leaders are generally among the people with the most formal (colonial) education in the community, and they have identified the notion of a language with that of a set of norms to be taught, as was taught to them in the

dominant colonial language. This normative bend is further complicated by often acrimonious discussions of whose language is the most representative and therefore should be documented and then hopefully taught, between that of the old traditional speakers and that of the young fluent speakers. Attitudes toward language change can also be a real challenge for the field linguists caught between community factions, and navigating between the puristic and folklorizing tendencies of some and the claimed needs of others to modernize the language in order to make it adapt to the present world of its speakers.

3.3.3.3. *Facing Language Ownership*

More extreme yet, one may also encounter community attitudes towards the language that will severely limit data collection, such as communities that have a very developed sense of language ownership and that do not want to teach their ethnic language to outsiders. This is known of some linguistic communities of the south-west of the USA, and is also the basic attitude of some Amazonian communities, for instance.[11] Language ownership issues in terms of diffusion of information on the language are also now systematically and pressingly raised by the new archiving projects and use of web technologies.

3.3.4. Conclusions: on the Extra Complications of Fieldwork on Endangered Languages

The point of this section of § 3.3 was therefore to reveal some of the hidden dimensions of fieldwork on endangered languages that can make this kind of linguistic work more challenging than most outsiders can envision. The issues faced by field linguists are varied, from understanding their place in the history of the native community's dealings with outsiders, to facing, sometimes in the most intimate and personal way, the multiple aspects of loss characteristic of such work on endangered to moribund languages, to

[11] Ospina Bozzi (2002) is such an instance of fieldwork with one of the last nomadic groups of the Colombian Amazonian region, the Yuhup Maku. It was a very difficult monolingual fieldwork setting that demanded she follow tenaciously the group moving through the forest, leaving her no other recourse than integrating herself in daily activities of subsistence and learning to speak the language by observation and self-teaching. It is difficult to conceive of some major documentation project with teams and cameras under such circumstances. The grammatical analysis found in the doctoral thesis is the result of years of contact with the group and numerous field trips, some of them having been unproductive because the group could not be located in its displacements in the forest: conditions that render any field project difficult to time, and yet the language presents extremely interesting linguistic characteristics well worth any effort at describing it.

being confronted with the realities of complex and commonly very contradictory attitudes of members of the community, toward speakers, toward language variation and language change, and toward outsiders. A further issue for field linguists is to be confronted with the wide variety of types of speakers one encounters in such situations, which is the topic of the next section.

3.4. Working with Speakers of Endangered Languages

As already mentioned in passing, in a situation of endangered languages, not only are there fewer and fewer speakers but, in addition, there are many different types of speakers, of the kind that are not found in situations of full vitality of a language. Following Dorian (1982), it is in addition the position of this chapter that field linguists working with communities of endangered languages should consider taking a wider rather than narrower scope and conception of what constitutes the linguistic community at hand, and include in the process of documentation and description as many types of speakers as possible, including those that, from our common experience with vital language communities, would appear to be at the margins of the linguistic community. They too have their place and their contributions to make, particularly in contributing to the basic social fabric a language needs to survive.

3.4.1. About Speakers of Endangered Languages

Speakers of endangered languages are characterized by particular traits which linguists need to take into account in order to handle appropriately the various types of interactions likely to arise, and to identify better the nature of the data they are collecting.

3.4.1.1. Typology of Speakers of Endangered Languages

Speakers of a vital language normally present great diversity in their knowledge, attitude, and talent for working on their language. All field linguists know that some speakers can be superb linguistic consultants, while working with others can be difficult, sluggish, and frustrating. The situation is always much more complex when dealing with speakers of endangered languages, both because of the inherent limitation of choice of speakers with whom to work that has already been mentioned, but also, as this section intends to point out, because of the types of speakers one is likely to encounter in these

situations. What follows is a quick consideration of the types of speakers of an endangered-language-speaker community and the ways in which this diversity relates to the process of data collecting.

3.4.1.2. About a Typology in the First Place

Various attempts at building a typology of speakers of endangered language communities are available in the literature, such as Campbell and Muntzel (1989), Dorian (1982, 1989), Dressler (1978), and Sasse (1992). Grinevald Craig (1998) was an overview of this literature at that point. The intrinsic difficulty in establishing a workable typology of speakers resides in the nature of the linguistic community, in particular in the effects of the progressive state of decay of the linguistic social networks and of the reduction of the domains of use of the language.

Part of the difficulty in building a typology of speakers of endangered languages comes from deciding whether to approach the task from a linguistic competence perspective or from a language use perspective, i.e. by how well the speaker knows the language, vs. how often and regularly she or he still uses it. The approach taken here is one that attempts to categorize speakers first on the basis of their knowledge of the language; it places the different types of speakers on a continuum from monolingualism in the minority language to practical monolingualism in the socially dominant language, with all degrees of progressive bilingualism in between minority and dominant language.

In some ways such an approach would not be very different from a study of language shift in immigrant communities. However, what makes the situation different in the case of endangered languages is the complex interlocking of multiple factors beyond the level of language competence of a particular speaker, such as his or her mode and extent of acquisition, length and type of exposure to the language, community and personal attitudes. The result is that no two speakers will have the same language history, although a categorization of some recurring prototypes may be worked out.[12]

3.4.1.3. Types of Speakers

There seems to be a consensus that the major prototypes of speakers to be reckoned with in situations of language endangerment by language shift can be identified on a primary distinction of three levels of competence,

[12] Bert (2001) offers a discussion of the need to consider all these variables based on extensive interviews with over a hundred of the last speakers of Franco-Provençal.

yielding the types of fluent speakers, so-called semi-speakers, and terminal speakers.

Fluent speakers. Among fluent speakers one needs to distinguish two subcategories that have been labelled "old fluent speakers" and "young fluent speakers", although the labels may be confusing, since they do not appeal directly to the age of the speaker. "Old fluent" are the traditional speakers raised in that language alone, and most secure in it. The expression "young fluent" refers to bilinguals who are still fluent in the endangered language but speak it in a somewhat changed form. By the time a linguist arrives, the language may be so endangered that those speakers are in fact some of the older people of the community. Characteristically the new form of language spoken by these "young fluent" speakers is accepted by the community. As it turns out, discussions of standardization and revitalization often involve choosing between older and younger fluent forms of speech to be taught to the learners.

Semi-speakers. The category of semi-speakers, prominent in Dorian's writing, is the category most emblematic of situations of endangered languages. It is a large category which includes all members of the community with appropriate receptive skills, but varying levels of productive skills. The category includes semi-speakers, who can be fluent but whose changed forms of the language are considered mistakes, and weak semi-speakers with a limited ability to produce speech—speech which tends to be made mostly of frozen expressions. It is worth noting that it is from this generally larger semi-speakers group that some of the most involved activists of language revitalization emerge.

Terminal speakers and rememberers. These are members of the linguistic community with very limited productive skills, but some passive knowledge. This very limited knowledge can either be the result of a very partial acquisition of the endangered language, with the effect of producing some form of substratum influence on the dominant language, or the result of an advanced level of language attrition on the part of once very good childhood speakers. Such speakers should not be overlooked in fieldwork, particularly in efforts at gathering speakers, since they may gain back or reacquire some partial active use and can always help reconstitute a sense of community at organized gatherings. They are bound to derive deep satisfaction from the renewed contact with the language, provided they are not too psychologically scarred and scared about that language (such as in the case of survivors of massacres).

3.4.1.4. *Projected Revisions to the Typology*

This is a working typology and terminology that identifies some major types of speakers of endangered languages that fieldworkers may encounter. The projected revisions will take into account the need to review some of the terminology, such as the contrast between "old vs. young" fluent speakers, often misunderstood; or the key term of "semi-speaker" itself, sometimes taken so literally that it seems to mostly evoke incompetent speakers, even if the category explicitly includes fluent speakers; or the terms "terminal" and "language death", which have been criticized as being politically incorrect.[13] The other revisions of this typology will underline the limitless variety of speakers, in fact their uniqueness in the case of the very last speakers of a language, and work out a set of variables to describe the attributes of those speakers rather than types to box them in.

Here is not the place to sort out this problem of terminology and typology, but just to acknowledge the existence of a wide variety of speakers and to consider their interactions with field linguists in the building of a database for the description of an endangered language. As already mentioned, to the extent that the knowledge of the language may linger on in a fragmented way among the various types of speakers, it is important to consult as many speakers of as many types as possible. Their contributions will be of different types too, but all are valuable, in terms of time depth, coverage of topics, levels of retention of certain aspects of the language, and eventually the study of the process of language degenerescence itself.

[13] Dressler (1978) had originally talked of:

healthy speakers
weaker speakers
preterminal speakers
better terminal speakers
worse terminal speakers

while Campbell and Muntzel (1989) worked with the following categories of speakers:

S = strong, nearly fluent speakers
I = imperfect but reasonably fluent speakers
W = weak speakers
R = rememberers

which Sasse (1992) reorganized as:

S = rusty speakers
I and W = semi-speakers
R = both from rusty speakers and of semi-speakers.

3.4.2. Working with this Great Variety of Speakers

Working with speakers of endangered languages brings about a number of challenges, from identifying them to working with them, some of which are mentioned below.

3.4.2.1. Counting the Last Speakers

The nature of the social fabric of the linguistic community is such that it will take time to identify all the speakers, particularly the isolated ones and the ones who have not been claiming to be speakers. It is likely that the speakers themselves do not know who are all the other speakers to the extent that some know the language but do not use it ever, and are not identified as speakers. Identifying speakers is a slow process best carried out over a period of time, as there are usually more last speakers than said.

3.4.2.2. Evaluating Speakers' Knowledge of the Endangered Language

There may be surprises in the evaluation of the knowledge of a speaker. Self-evaluation is based on identity criteria, with common over- and underestimation of that knowledge. Self-claimed speakers can find themselves confronted with their limitations when asked for complete grammatical paradigms, for instance, while self-claimed non-speakers can be heard correcting those speakers from the back of the room without accepting being identified as speakers.[14] Dynamics can also be set off in such a way that renewed contact with the language may either reactivate some knowledge in the case of language attrition of rememberers, or provide opportunities for new (re)acquisition in the case of some semi-speakers.

3.4.2.3. Collecting Data from Speakers of Endangered Languages

Data-collecting methods need to be rethought for field situations of oral tradition languages in the first place, but the extra dimension of a situation of endangered languages often demands further consideration from a methodological standpoint. Most standard elicitation methods taught in university field method courses need to be adapted, to obtain natural data and to avoid confronting speakers with their limitations, which potentially results in

[14] This is the category of "ghost speakers" identified by Bert in his fieldwork on Franco-Provençal of France. They were wives of self-proclaimed speakers who stood in the back of the kitchen watching the interviews and the taping sessions and would correct or complete the answers of their husbands without wanting to be identified as speakers. This points to the fact that there is a social identity of "last speaker" that some endorse and others do not, independent of their level of fluency in the endangered language (Bert 2001).

psychologically difficult and even painful situations unlikely to arise with speakers of vital languages.[15] What follow are some notes on methodological issues to be entertained.

Recreating settings for natural language use. Natural data basically means data that are not the product of translation from direct elicitation. They may be spontaneously produced, or they may be produced on the basis of certain kinds of verbal, visual, or manipulated stimuli. Although this requirement is not really specific to endangered languages, the reality of endangered languages is that possibilities to collect natural data may have become so limited that it becomes an absolute necessity to think of how to create settings for natural language use.

The basic practice is to bring speakers together in order to provide new opportunities for social gatherings and language interaction, and therefore promote the production of natural speech. This is much easier said than done actually in many extreme cases of language endangerment, because it requires identifying the speakers in the first place, then networking among them to gather them, and strategizing the encounters (like organizing transportation of sometimes geographically distant or disabled people, and providing strategic support for the hosting party). However, the efforts always pay off, as such gatherings may come to mean a lot to the speakers who yearn for some social encounters of the sort in order to have a chance to reuse their language and (re)activate their relation to other speakers. This is valid for all types of speakers, and as valued by semi-speakers as by fluent speakers. When doable, it becomes the most productive approach to (video)taping different kinds of language data.[16]

These social gatherings create reasons to talk, through shared activities, such as telling stories, including personal narratives, or listening and

[15] However, one must cite the now classical and still relevant guide to the experience of linguistic fieldwork by Samarin (1967), which considers the basic issues of fieldwork *in situ* with good sense, in contrast to the recent book by Vaux and Cooper (1999), which strikes one as being extremely Euro/USA- (even Harvard-) centric and cast into a surprisingly traditional approach to field methods. Bouquiaux and Thomas (1976) are valuable for ethnolinguistic fieldwork but from quite outdated to downright odd in their grammatical questionnaires. More useful as guide for grammatical work are Shopen (1985) and Payne (1997). The author's two favourites for good reading on the general topic of fieldwork are from ethnographer Wolcott (1995) already mentioned, and folklorist Jackson (1987).

[16] In some circumstances, as in urban settings, the impossibility of physically gathering last speakers may be partly compensated by using some technology such as conference telephone calls and video links, obviously only in the regions where that is feasible. If nothing else is available, one can also play back recordings of some speakers to others, although this will not necessarily work immediately for the reasons discussed below.

commenting on recordings or videos of other speakers from other places or other times, or talking about still pictures, videos, or handled objects.[17]

Using a variety of material for stimulating language production. A variety of stimuli can be used to trigger language production in general, and to work on targeted aspects of the language, although, as fieldworkers know, when they are used in communities with no literacy tradition of the kind that relies on formal education and training, those stimuli, particularly the ones relying on purely visual stimuli, may not produce by and large the kind of data they are meant to elicit on very specific topics. But they can be very productive, nevertheless, for simply eliciting natural language material.[18]

For general linguistic analysis it should not matter that speakers seem to often ignore the story line implicit in the sequential arrangement of videos and books alike, or the main event of a picture, and express much more concern and interest for minute details of the pictures (like musings about the dress of the protagonists, the kinds of flowers and animals of the backdrop, the time of day or season of year it might have been). While attending to those details (in our eyes) they are producing actual coherent sentences that are good data for a descriptive grammar of the language. It is only with long-standing familiarity with the language and its speakers' community, and once efficient working relations have been developed with some of the speakers, that one could be expected to create appropriate stimuli for a particular type of data, and then to collect reasonably reliable data, in order to produce desired reliable and comprehensive analysis of the data.[19]

About direct elicitation methods. Although the use of direct elicitation is probably the data-collecting method still most used in the field today and most

[17] Since the time of the original conference and the first version of this chapter, the field of language documentation and archiving has largely developed, so that today a discussion of the use of video and new computer technologies would have to be considered, although the focus here is still on the human and social interaction of field linguists with the last speakers of an endangered language.

[18] Examples of such stimuli used in cross-linguistic research on specific linguistic traits have been, for instance, the 1970s pioneer "Pear Story video" of W. Chafe (University of California at Berkeley) that was meant to track discourse features, or the 1980s "Chicken video" of T. Givón (University of Oregon) that was meant to elicit serialization data. More recently, the wordless Mercer "Frog Story" children's books have been widely used for the study of adult and children's narrative skills, in particular by teams supervised by D. Slobin (University of California at Berkeley).

[19] There is also a difference between different types of visual stimuli, from line drawings of simple objects like dictionary illustrations, to more complex drawings of scenes, to still pictures which, when just black and white, can disconcert the speakers.

Beyond visual stimuli that are always likely not to produce the expected in illiterate communities, one can turn also to the manipulation of objects as a trigger for the production of language. Some of the better-known cases of the use of varied stimuli are the ones that have been developed by the researchers of the Language and Cognition Group of the Max Planck Institute of Nijmegen for instance, in particular those that were targeting the expression of spatial relations.

commonly demonstrated in field methods courses in university campus settings, it should clearly be limited to a complementary role in situations of endangered languages at first. Particularly unreliable is the method most used, that of direct translation, which consists of the linguist asking the speaker: "how do you say X?", X being some artificial sentence out of context built around a grammatical point of interest to the linguist.[20] There is no reason why such type of questioning should make any sense to most speakers of oral traditions in their own home environment. Some can be trained to perform, if they happen to be in the small percentage of the natural linguists of a language, but most will never really be. And it can in fact become particularly morally objectionable to confine oneself to this method with linguistically insecure semi-speakers who are then made to feel like failures if they cannot come up immediately with a translation.[21]

3.4.2.4. *Conclusion: Adapting Methodologies for Data Collection and Analysis*

Much of what was said above is actually, if one thinks about it, common sense, but it is probably useful to articulate these methodological issues because they are still not part of most training for linguistic fieldwork. In order to collect reliable data in situations of endangered languages, the methods to be used must be diversified and adapted for a relatively special population of speakers, because in situations of endangered languages, the last speakers are few by definition, and they are whoever they are and not often likely to become trained to respond to data-collecting strategies developed for vital languages. Even good speakers may not be able to

[20] This method is always objectionable in terms of reliability of data when imposed on neophyte linguistic consultants from illiterate cultures. It is only because they have done the adjustments necessary to survive in that dominant culture, including a test approach to knowledge, that linguistic consultants of field methods courses on campuses may give the appearance of responding appropriately to direct elicitation.

[21] This is not to say that direct elicitation cannot be very useful, but only as a secondary method, at the service of analysing naturally produced language material, and mostly as an exploration of the glossing process of naturally collected text. It must always be handled with great care, controlled with multiple checking and attention to non-verbal information such as body language cues, and only with speakers with whom one has established a productive working relation. It follows from the above that the use of field elicitation guides in the forms of questionnaires consisting of standard lists of sentences to translate may have something intrinsically inappropriate in approaching a new language, particularly in the case of the type of endangered languages considered here. This is not to say that questionnaires are of no use, but that their use is limited. They make sense for instance when checking the particularities of a variant form of a language or group of languages for which there is already a solid linguistic knowledge, for organizing already collected and analysed data, and for checking for gaps in data on basic grammatical topics which are of interest to other linguists interested in typological, areal, or genetic issues.

produce narratives, may never really learn to give an exact translation, and will forever ignore the value of a paradigmatic organization of knowledge. As suggested, much of the effort, in the first place, must aim at triggering the production of natural sequences of language, to obtain a certain quantity of data and to ensure the reliability of this data.

3.4.3. About Linguists Working on Endangered Languages

Two more aspects of doing fieldwork on endangered languages which are not often made explicit but would certainly deserve more attention will be taken up here. One touches on the kind of personality profile best suited in fieldworkers for this kind of job, and the other on implications of carrying out such field projects from a professional and academic career point of view.

3.4.3.1. A Certain Personality Profile

By now it should be obvious that the part of the fieldwork experience which consists in working directly with speakers of endangered language communities in the manner suggested here actually calls for a certain personality profile. The essential personality trait is connected to the fact that much of this approach to fieldwork relies on the ability of the linguist to accept not being in control of the situation, a lack of control which takes many forms. Beyond the usual lack of control of basic fieldwork, which is handled differently by different field linguists, who develop different types of work relations, there is, in the case of work on endangered languages, a much more pervasive lack of control. There are first limitations on when, where, and with whom one can work, and later limitations on what one can do with the speakers with whom one can work.

As already mentioned when talking of the issue of data collecting, monitoring the process of data production can be a challenge, once the linguist has managed to get together with speakers. And this process is often more a matter of triggering data production rather than of controlling that process. One must be patient and allow data to trickle in, and one must bear with data one does not know what to do with at first. Because of the complex relation that can hold between those speakers and their ethnic language, it is also both ethically and strategically sound to be particularly aware of the balance of power between the parties and to give to the speakers as much of a sense of control as possible. Relinquishing control is a mark of respect for the knowledge they have of the language, an invitation made to them to become

invested in the work in whichever way they want or can, and it signals a conscious attention to keeping them feeling as comfortable and successful as possible.

Relinquishing control is probably one of the most difficult postures to accept for academics. First-world academia tends to naturally select for, and then preferably promote, highly individualistic, self-motivated, and determined free spirits. This world values most highly the pursuit of "basic research" carried out within paradigms partly defined by a culturally bound sense of efficiency and productivity. All of this can be counterproductive in endangered language field situations, may well actually work against the production of reliable and comprehensive linguistic descriptions of those languages in the first place, and may not respond at all to the needs of the community itself (much of the above has already been discussed in Grinevald 1997, 1998, 2000, and 2003*a*).

3.4.3.2. Energy, Time Commitment, and Professional Risk

Doing fieldwork on an endangered language implies a basic energy and time commitment that also needs to be acknowledged. A reasonable estimate of the length of time for the amount of work it takes to build a basic database with which to produce a reasonably accurate and complete description of an endangered language probably runs around three years minimum, between field time and months of data processing and analysis.

It probably also needs to be said here how dangerous fieldwork on a very endangered language may be to the career development of a linguist, particularly graduate students and junior faculty, who are in fact the most likely to commit to it. If this line of fieldwork is time, money, and energy demanding (think of fieldwork in the Amazon for instance), it is also basically risky in many ways. Risky in the sense of the dissonance and alienation mentioned before between academic, financing foundation, field and community pressures. This is particularly the case for linguists involved in major documentation/revitalization projects with strict timetables. Risky in the basic sense of not being able to collect enough data for a doctoral thesis or for publications of the sort valued in promotion procedures, due to the death of speakers or any other factor rendering fieldwork difficult to impossible. Risky in the kind of data collected not providing the materials expected to enter the theoretical debate arena the way it is being set up by linguists working on major vital languages. Risky in the sense of relations to the community always being subject to quick turns because of misunderstandings or disappointments. The academic community of linguists needs to consider those risks and see

how to best minimize them to protect those that it sends off to do the work of describing and documenting endangered languages.

3.4.4. An Invitation to Take up the Challenge

This piece of writing is not meant in anyway to discourage linguists from contemplating doing work on endangered languages, but rather to provide some realistic insights into the nature of the enterprise, for all parties concerned, potential fieldworkers in the first place of course, but also foundations that finance such work, and members of the linguistic profession that advocate such work.

3.4.4.1. A Collective Responsibility

The work is important and urgent, and it ought to be the business of all sectors of the profession. Those field linguists available, interested, and willing to take on a part of the daunting task of documenting as many endangered languages as possible before it is too late need to be nurtured by the profession. They should be first adequately prepared and trained; then, while they are doing the work, they should be as well supported as possible—financially, psychologically, and academically—and their place in academia should be assured so they can pursue this line of work. Unless we commit collectively to all those aspects of nurturance we really have no business making much of a fuss advocating saving and documenting endangered languages.

3.4.4.2. More About Why We Do it

I would therefore strongly encourage those engaged in such work to tell those interested in doing such work what sense of profound satisfaction and what occasional exhilaration obliterate all the moments of frustration, confusion, and heartache that are an inextricable part of the enterprise. We should all tell our future colleagues how it feels to be opting to be a linguist in the real world, dealing concretely with the very real catastrophe of the accelerated loss of the majority of the languages of the world. In so doing we are privileged to discover the riches of yet undescribed languages by working with speakers and communities that can be profoundly grateful and proud to contribute to the salvage of their endangered ancestral language. Some of the last speakers may have dreamed of it and may have hoped for it for a long time and will convey to us how extremely relieved they are to be given a chance to participate in some project to describe and document it. Those are strong moments in a linguist's life, the priceless

human dimension that keeps fieldworkers going back in spite of it all. Any fieldworker familiar with this kind of fieldwork is certainly able to communicate, to anyone interested in hearing about it, how this human dimension of fieldwork amply makes up for all the kinds of headaches and heartaches that have been spelled out in the previous sections of this paper.[22]

3.4.4.3. A Last Warning

However, in the end, and to be honest, fieldworkers also need to warn about the challenge of becoming a tightrope walker between the ivory tower of academia and the first-world values of financing foundations where the discipline of linguistics develops and is supported, and the realities of often embittered linguistic communities of endangered languages, with their complex sociopolitical set-ups where the last speakers can be themselves very marginalized. And this needs to be said maybe more so as time passes and the topic of language endangerment reaches beyond academia and acquires a certain veneer of hype within a developing public discourse of saving the biolinguistic diversity of the world.

3.5. A Case Study of Fieldwork on an Endangered Language

What follows is a descriptive account of the development of one such field project on a very endangered language of Nicaragua. It is the story of a salvage linguistic project for a moribund language, but in fact a linguistic project embedded in a revitalization project of much larger scope, itself conceived within major political dynamics at the time in the country. The narrative will first situate the project in its specific sociopolitical context and will then focus on the main topic of this chapter, that of working with speakers of endangered languages. It will recount moments of the search for speakers and try to give a flavour of the strong mixture of contentment and frustrations that characterized the data-collecting phase of the project.

3.5.1. The Sociopolitical Circumstances of the Project

The Rama Language Project (RLP) of Nicaragua took place in the context of the Sandinista Revolution of Nicaragua, as described in Craig (1992*b*), and stretched over a period of ten years starting in 1984.

[22] Newman and Ratliff (2001) is a good place to hear about linguistic fieldwork and the relation of linguists to speakers, in a number of chapters on speakers of endangered languages.

3.5.1.1. *Regional Autonomy Project and Linguistic Rights in Time of War*

The Rama project was initiated in response to demands expressed to the Sandinistas by Rama community leaders claiming their new linguistic rights granted to all ethnic groups of the region by the new Autonomy laws. That region was then called the "Atlantic Coast" and was the half of the country where indigenous populations were still speaking various indigenous languages (Miskitu, Sumu, Rama). The Ramas were concerned that they had lost their ethnic language and were asking for help to bring it back for ethnic identity purposes. The linguistic description component of the Rama Language Project was therefore cast from the start at the core of a much wider project, conceived by the Rama community and the authorities at all levels as a language and culture revitalization project. This was happening at the time of the so-called Contra War, a war waged against the Sandinista government by anti-Sandinista forces (largely financed, supported, and led by the USA government). The Rama population, as often happens in such conflicts, was caught between the two sides, and the Rama language project was conceived in part as a gesture of peace.

3.5.1.2. *The Rama People and the Rama Language*

The Rama people themselves were considered then as the most marginalized population of a multiethnic autonomous region, below Spanish-speaking Mestizos and English-speaking Creoles, and below other indigenous people of the regions, the Miskitus and the Sumus they dominated. There were less than a thousand Ramas in total. The language of the Rama population was a form of the English Creole of the region known as Miskitu Coast Creole (MCC), and very few could speak Spanish. The Rama language is a Chibchan language, of a large family of languages spoken from Honduras in the north to Colombia in the south, and no study of it was available. At the time of the request made by the Ministry of Culture to the present linguist in 1985, it was said to be spoken by only three old men of the island of Rama Cay, the only Rama community known to the outside.

3.5.2. The Search for Speakers

As it turned out, for complex political and sociological reasons, and to the lingering dismay of the linguist, none of the three old men of Rama Cay participated in the Rama Language Project and their actual knowledge of Rama was never assessed.

3.5.2.1. Finding Three Rama Speakers to Work on the Rama Language

The first speaker of the project was actually located indirectly through academic networking, by connecting to a fellow Amerindianist, Lyle Campbell, who had done a survey of the endangered languages of Central America some years before and connected the linguist to an ex-research assistant of his field project, Barbara Assadi, who had stayed behind in Nicaragua and had integrated into the Rama community for a while. She in turn provided information and contact for a good speaker of the language, said to be eager to tell about her language.

An initial visit to Bluefields a year into the process allowed for a first contact with this speaker that sealed the fate of the project. Miss Nora, as she is widely known now, who was first located as a destitute refugee from the war in the grounds of the Moravian church of Bluefields, later turned into the inspired leader of the whole project (Craig 1992*a*; Grinevald 2003*b*; Grinevald and Kauffmann 2004). Work on a grammar of the language was finally initiated with that one speaker the following summer, with research funds secured from the National Science Foundation.

The first summer of linguistic work with Miss Nora revealed that she was a fluent but semi-speaker of the language, and an excellent language consultant. So, for the next field trip, Miss Nora had recruited her daughter-in-law Cristina Benjamins to help her out with the linguistic study of the language. This native speaker from the mainland who used Rama every day of her life became the main source of data for the study of the grammar of Rama.

The third main language consultant has been Walter Ortiz, one of Miss Nora's nephews. He was a young fluent speaker, in his fifties then, who was considered by all to be the one "intellectual" and scholar among the community of Rama speakers because he was (and still is) the only Rama speaker with some literacy skills (and at that only in Spanish, the national language). He was the hope for back-up and leadership of the team of speakers of the project who eagerly awaited his return from Costa Rica for several years. He joined the project after the completion of the grammar, at the time of the dictionary project.

3.5.2.2. The Different Skills of the Three Main Consultants

The Rama language project leader, known as Miss Nora (her full name being Leonora Rigby), lived for her dream of documenting the language so it would not disappear without leaving a trace. A dignified woman with a vision for what could and should be done in the reticent community of Rama Cay, she was the daughter of the last Rama shaman who "talked to the

tigers in the Tiger language". She had learned Rama at the age of 10 when she had gone to live in the jungle with her father and stepmother, both monolingual Rama speakers; she later married a pure Rama and raised her children on the mainland. She produced short narrative texts after some coaching, and regained higher fluency throughout the project. She was an excellent linguistic consultant, a natural linguist type of speaker. She corresponded to the type of native person known in the literature on fieldwork as "foreigner seekers": in her case it was her third serious try in ten years at having the Rama language documented by a foreigner.[23]

Cristina Benjamins was a young fluent speaker who uses Rama to this day on a daily basis. She was a challenging language consultant at first, because she was too much of a natural language user to accommodate easily to the artificiality of linguistic elicitation. She initially had great difficulty at a number of tasks. One, for instance, was to sit still in the office during work sessions, a non-activity she was totally unaccustomed to, being the mother of eight children and spending her days in numerous physical activities to attend to the needs of her family. She furthermore had great difficulty concentrating on repeating exactly what she had said on the tape recordings (why repeat the same since it had clearly not been understood! was her attitude), and did not have patience with the task of translating exactly what she had actually said (preferring to add additional information to complete the narration). The first work sessions were very intense (because of her rapid-fire native way of talking) and very tense (because she did not see the purpose of staying since she felt she was not doing what was wanted of her). She was by far the best speaker of Rama available, and luckily she stayed (at the urging of Miss Nora) and became over time a very valuable linguistic consultant, including for direct elicitation work. She contributed the bulk of the narrative collection which is the basis for the grammar description; she was best with personal narratives, in the course of which she talked of the way of life of the Ramas of the mainland, but had only fragmented knowledge of the main oral tradition of the Rama known as the Adam cycle.

Walter Ortiz is a native speaker from the mainland, with very basic literacy skills. Unlike Miss Nora, he never developed much ease with grammatical elicitation, and, unlike Cristina Benjamins, he did not manage to contribute any narratives for the textual database. He was, on the other hand, invaluable for dictionary work, patient and detailed in his terminology

[23] Previous attempts were with Barbara Assadi, and a German volunteer early in the Sandinista times (see Craig 1989).

and descriptions, particularly of his surrounding world and male survival activities. He is a quiet and private man, and his dream has been that some day a younger man will approach him and tell him he wants to learn to really speak Rama, the way he himself had learned the intricacies of it from his uncle, living with him alone in the jungle.[24]

3.5.2.3. Looking for More Speakers

Identifying the last speakers of Rama took several field trips over several years. First, Barbara Assadi on a trip to Bluefields helped work out with the first two Rama speakers available a list of the other last speakers of Rama. Some of those last speakers were brought to the Bluefields CIDCA office to be interviewed,[25] and trips around the Bluefields lagoon were organized to visit others. Later, as a considerable number of the mainland Ramas had taken refuge from the war in neighbouring Costa Rica (the Rama land borders on Costa Rica and reaching Costa Rica by sea is relatively easy), among them a number of the native speakers of the language, a trip was arranged to make contact with them in Costa Rica.[26] Finally, as the project took on more visibility with work sessions on Rama Cay, and with Miss Nora beginning to fulfil her dream of teaching some Rama to the kindergarten children of Rama Cay, rememberers and terminal speakers began to make themselves known on Rama Cay.

Three years from the start of the project, thirty-six fluent speakers had been identified (thirty-two mainlanders and four islanders), with an additional twenty-two limited speakers, for an actual total of fifty-eight speakers. These figures were a matter of both good news and bad news. The good news was that there was a much higher number of speakers than expected, and not

[24] A dream of a one-dyad master–apprentice programme of the kind Leanne Hinton has been setting up in California for some of the most moribund languages that some communities want saved. Today Walter Ortiz has taken over from Miss Nora the teaching of some Rama in several grades of the elementary school of the island; he shares his time between Rama Cay and the mainland where he likes to retreat from everything and cultivate land for as long a time as his duties in the school and the increasingly dangerous situation on the mainland permit.

[25] The Rama Language Project was locally sponsored from the start by a research centre specializing in the affairs of the region, the Center for the Documentation and Research of the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA). An office for the project was set up in Bluefields, not far from the Rama Cay community.

[26] Easier said than done. Costa Rica was the base for the Contra activities from the south, and some of the Ramas were involved in Contra war activities. This meant negotiating permission for the trip, and official support to try to convince Rama speakers to come back to Nicaragua, at the expressed request of their relatives involved in the project. Offers for amnesty and recognition of refugee status with corresponding material support upon return, from Nicaraguan officials supporting the Rama Language Project, were transmitted to the Ramas of Costa Rica. A good number of them did return. But it did not translate into more speakers for the study of the Rama language, with the exception of Walter Ortiz.

just an old population of speakers (fourteen speakers were below 44 years of age, eight below 64, and only five above 65). The bad news for the linguistic description of the language was that work turned out to be impossible with most speakers. A striking characteristic of the profile of the last fluent and even native speakers was, for instance, that the male speakers (in a striking dominant ratio of male to female speakers of 22M/9F) were also by and large single men living by themselves deep in the jungle, with no descendants, and inaccessible in all senses of the word.[27]

An interesting feature of this sociolinguistic profile of Rama speakers, arrived at through many work sessions and interviews of speakers themselves, coupled with multiple checks and counterchecks over the years, is that it has never been accepted or acknowledged by the wider community, neither local, regional, nor national, in spite of repeated publications of the figures and numerous public interventions. To this date, the Nicaraguan myth of the Rama language spoken by only three old men of Rama Cay tenaciously lives on.

3.5.3. Trying to Work with More Rama Speakers

Of the fifty-eight speakers recounted, twenty-five were contacted and visited, and thirteen were interviewed in some capacity; of those interviewed, only eight provided some language data, and generally only very little, so that, in the end, the description of the language had to rely on the three speakers already presented. A rundown of all the speakers considered will give below a sense of the diversity of speakers contacted and of the types of language information they could and could not give.[28]

3.5.3.1. Other Native Speakers that did not Work Out as Language Consultants

As already mentioned, the three famous old men of Rama Cay said everywhere to be the last speakers of the Rama language apparently only spoke Rama anymore when drunk. Although they had apparently participated some years before in a previous attempt at documenting the language with a

[27] The majority of these had fled to Costa Rica and did return to Nicaragua but went back to live in the jungle.

[28] While the three major speakers that have been the main consultants of the project are identified by their names because they have been identified in all writings on the language, in recognition of their active contribution to the salvaging of their language, the other Ramas mentioned will not be personally identified to respect their privacy.

young German male anthropologist, they ended up having no contact with the project and their actual fluency could not be assessed.

Two mainland native speakers eager to participate in the project were considered but their contributions could not be processed and did not become part of the database for the grammar. One was a young fluent speaker, sister and daily companion of Cristina Benjamins, whose texts did not cohere and whose ability as a linguistic consultant remained too limited for language analysis. The other was an old monolingual man who had lived for decades isolated in the jungle and spoke what the others labelled "real Rama". He was considered by all to be the "best speaker" and agreed to tape interviews on the "old ways" and traditional place names.[29] Those interviews took place at the CIDCA office, and turned into major social gatherings for Rama speakers who had not been together for a very long time and had not talked to him in a long time either. It first appeared that these hours of tapings would provide the core of the database. Unfortunately that could not be the case, as they turned out to be too difficult to transcribe and to translate, for reasons that remain unclear to this day. None of the speakers present, including the two main consultants of the project, could repeat what he had said, although his rapid slurred and toothless speech had not seemed to be an obstacle to their enjoyment of his recountings. The interaction had been joyful and intense, communication seemed to have been happening, as witnessed by the laughing and questioning captured on tape, but it sadly yielded nothing for the linguistic analysis of the language.[30]

More disappointment for the linguist in search of good data ensued when several mainland native speakers in the old fluent speaker category took part in some of the project activities but watched and said nothing, or so little so whispered and so mumbled that the data were not usable either. For instance, the brother of the old monolingual speaker of the gatherings just mentioned clearly enjoyed immensely being there, smiled and laughed, but never uttered a word. And a married couple of old fluent monolinguals, whose participation had been eagerly anticipated, looked bewildered and apprehensive all through the interviews they had agreed to. Direct interaction between them

[29] As a matter of fact, these interviews took place in a dramatic way. He was on his way back down to the jungle after a long hospitalization in Bluefields, as he had asked to be taken back to Rama land feeling he was soon going to die. He did not die, and lived a few more years, settled at the mouth of a major creek where Ramas would stop and care for him before going further up the creek to their settlements.

[30] Years later, when asked also to listen to the tapes, Walter Ortiz, the third consultant, could hardly make out some stretches of recording now and then. The mystery therefore remains as to what really happened then.

and the linguist turned out to not be possible, and even coaching by Rama speakers did not help either.

In the midst of the Contra War, the trip to Costa Rica had provided direct contact with one more native speaker, beside Walter Ortiz already mentioned. He was Miss Nora's elder brother; he listened attentively to her taped message in Rama asking him to return and join the project, but he did not return to Nicaragua for years. When he did, he went back deep into the jungle and was never interviewed again.

3.5.3.2. Working at the Margins: Rememberers and Semi-speakers

The Rama speakers from the island of Rama Cay included a number of rememberers and terminal speakers. The female rememberers identified were relatives of Miss Nora, who described them as native speakers who had been fully fluent decades before, but who had been traumatized into hiding their knowledge of the language. One was an old woman who, as a teenager, had accompanied Miss Nora, her younger cousin of 10 years of age then, for the first months she had gone to live with her monolingual father and stepmother, in order to help her as an interpreter. Although this elder cousin denied knowledge of Rama for the first years of the project, she later became eager to become involved, but she could never recover much fluency and died a few years into the project. Two young rememberers, nieces of Miss Nora, also denied knowledge of any Rama for years, in spite of Miss Nora vouching that they had been very good speakers; they never agreed to join any activities of the project.[31]

A considerable number of other Rama speakers with more limited knowledge and practice of Rama participated actively in the revitalization part of the project. They included schoolteachers eager to introduce some Rama in their classrooms, high school youngsters who wanted some Rama phrases to impress people with them in the streets of Bluefields, community members with some links to the Rama language, rememberers, and maybe even shy semi-speakers who filled the schoolroom on Rama-language Sunday meetings.

One of the semi-speakers worth mentioning, because of his key support to the project from the start and his new leadership role now, after the death

[31] The two of them were typical cases of trauma-induced severe language attrition, the trauma being a case of a dramatic family situation, and discrimination against tiger people on Rama Cay, rather than a case of outside attack on the community (as in some cases of ethnic massacres).

of Miss Nora, is Pedro MacCrea, her eldest son and Cristina Benjamins's husband. He was key to the project as boat captain, providing transportation for speakers between jungle, island of Rama Cay, and town of Bluefields; he was also an excellent spokesperson for the project. Interestingly he became more fluent in Rama as the years passed, reaching the point of carrying out interviews with monolingual speakers. He is today the most visible and charismatic representative of the Ramas in their battle to protect their land, dealing with authorities and international consultants, and appearing in different media speaking (sentences of) Rama.[32]

3.5.3.3. Cycles of Expectation and Frustration

What this rundown on speakers has emphasized is the difficulty of finding a number of speakers who could function as linguistic consultants, even if there were a certain number of speakers still. The point is that this case study is not necessarily a very special situation for a case of extremely endangered language. On this backdrop of a constant search, one can probably imagine the cycles of excitement and frustration, of tediousness and confusion common to most of these field situations. But one has to also mention, hidden behind such a list of helpful and not so helpful speakers, the weaving of strong bonds with a community in search of its last speakers. Somehow it is the interaction of all those speakers that produced eventually a more or less accurate picture of the linguistic community of this very endangered language, a picture quite different from the popular view outsiders had of that community, in fact.

Although the complexity of the Rama field situation exposed above is probably fairly typical of many cases of extreme language loss, it feels most important in closing to underline one aspect of this project. It is how both the production of the descriptive grammar of the language and the apparent success of the larger Rama language revitalization project of which it was a part are a tribute to the intelligence and the tenacity of one old woman, herself a fluent semi-speaker but with a vision and a natural linguist talent. There is no doubt in the mind of anybody that came close to her that Miss Nora was the real Rama language rescuer and that nothing much would have happened without her, as argued in Grinevald and Kauffmann (2004).

[32] His leadership status of today is reminiscent of the phenomenon described by Evans (2001), of the emergence of new leaders and new last speakers, as the most visible and prestigious one leaves the scene and others find their place.

3.5.3.4. Dealing with a Major Contradiction for the Language Revitalization Part of the Project

The sociolinguistic study showed that the Ramas were divided into two distinct communities: the majority of the population, the only Ramas recognized at that time, lived on an island in the lagoon of Bluefields called Rama Cay, while a much smaller group of a few dozen still lived on the mainland, along small creeks and on the ocean coast. The community of native speakers of Rama that still existed was from the mainland, and it is with members of that community that the description and documentation of the Rama language took place.

As it turned out, for the whole duration of the project, this division of the Rama community into two communities (island and mainland) was a major dimension to be constantly factored in. The prejudice the islanders felt toward the mainlanders was extreme, and resulted in the former systematically ignoring the existence of the latter in their report on the Rama community to the Sandinistas. The other way around, the mainlanders, including members of the last community of speakers of Rama, avoided contact with the islanders for that same reason.

The scenario was therefore complex: the demand for the revitalization of Rama came from the leaders of Rama Cay, islanders who only spoke English Creole and actually deep down had very mixed feelings about the Rama language. They were inclined to despise it as being a "primitive" language, as they had been told it was, and referred to it as the "tiger language", saying of the speakers of Rama that they were "tiger people". They had therefore wanted the revitalization to come from people of Rama Cay and were for that reason at first unwilling to accept language materials coming from the mainlanders, at the same time as the mainlanders did not want to set foot on the island, for that same reason. [33]

Therefore to the already negative attitudes of the general Nicaraguan population towards indigenous languages, and the particularly negative

[33] Today, twenty years later, the two communities are banding together, partly around the issue of a shared Rama language and culture revitalization vision that has been sharpened by a sense of doom and threat to their land base and all traditional ways of living. There is both severe threat of cultural (Rama Cay) and even physical extinction (mainland). The acculturation of islanders to the linguistic community of Bluefields is fast accelerating, as more families come to take refuge or settle there, many in hopes of providing secondary education to their children. But most acute today is the threat to the mainland community of more traditional Ramas created by the advance of the agricultural frontier from inland and of major international construction projects coming from the sea. A plan to build a railway (called the "dry canal", a replacement for the now obsolete Panama canal) across the traditional (and officially protected) Rama land threatens to cut off the last speakers to the south from the more numerous Rama community of Rama Cay to the north. Land speculation has already resulted in physical attacks on the Rama population (Mueller 2001).

attitudes of the people of the region for the Rama people, the Rama themselves added another layer of self-discrimination that rendered the project particularly difficult at first.

3.5.4. Some Figures: Time, (Wo)manpower, and Grant Support

To the extent that fieldwork projects on endangered languages are somewhat of a mystery to outsiders, a few figures from the Rama Language Project will be given here. It was of course just one in an infinity of possible projects, but it included major ingredients always necessary in such projects. Some of the dimensions of the project will be outlined in figures, and some of its characteristics will be underlined.

The production of the Rama grammar took six field trips, about ten months of actual fieldwork in total after the initial exploratory trip. It took three years of steady work by a team of three linguists. The principals of this team were three academics coming from the USA: a project coordinator and main fieldworker (Grinevald, at that time Craig), a data-processing specialist, linguistic fieldworker, and coordinator of the production of materials for the community (Bonny Tibbitts), and a community contact (Barbara Assadi) who offered fieldnotes, conducted the census of the last speakers (among whom she had lived for several years), and checked the data for cultural accuracy. A number of graduate and undergraduate students processed data.

The funding sources for the project were a combination of academic grants, from the National Science Foundation, Wenner-Grenn for Anthropological Research, and University of Oregon Research Funds for the grammar, to the National Endowment for the Humanities for the dictionary. As often calculated, applying for such grants, monitoring them, and reporting on the activities and results required about a third of the total time and energy invested in the project.[34]

[34] To be honest to the end, for the sake of the reality check that is the purpose of this chapter, and for the benefit of those embarking on such kinds of projects and taking risks, it is also necessary to say that the actual production of the dictionary was not completed within grant time, due to a combination of personal and political changes of circumstances. The Hans Rausing Endangered Language Documentation Project is therefore hereby acknowledged for its willingness to financially support the completion of the dictionary project, and the archiving of the materials of the first phase of the project, ten years later.

Independent of the reasons for not completing this particular project as per grant deadline, it might be worth taking the occasion to raise a taboo subject, which is that such things happen more often than admitted with field projects, particularly complex ones like this one, which demand more time and energy than is realistically factored into the grant schedules. It may be one of the responsibilities

Beyond numbers, this project was clearly cast in a particular fieldwork framework worth noting in the end. Although the list of speakers given above did not do justice to the level of involvement of the community of speakers and non-speakers, the enterprise was clearly cast into an "empowering fieldwork framework" with a clear ethical view of working ON the language FOR and WITH the speakers. The circumstances of this project, one of the projects of "Linguists for Nicaragua" of Sandinista times, were described in Craig (1992*b*). It might be worth mentioning finally that the bulk of the material produced for the community was the work of student volunteers from the University of Oregon,[35] and that the community part of the project received financial back-up from private human rights and solidarity groups, active in defence of the development programmes for the indigenous population at the time of the Contra War.[36]

3.6. Conclusions

This chapter has concentrated on the data-collecting issue for the description of endangered languages, taking into consideration three aspects of it in turn.

The first point was that linguistics fieldwork projects aiming at producing a description of an endangered language are today in most parts of the world more and more often woven into wider types of projects, which themselves may largely overlap: projects of linguistic description, language and culture documentation and language and culture maintenance or revitalization. Admittedly, this particular view of the likely type of field situations field linguists encounter today may be strongly biased by the author's experience with Native American situations of the Americas (North, Central, and South), and may not apply as much to certain other parts of the world (yet).

It would seem necessary that the new granting agencies preoccupied with the fate of endangered languages have a clear grasp of the realities on the

of senior members of the profession, such as the present author, to help raise the issue of probably very unrealistic output expectations of granting agencies now engaged in documentation of endangered languages on a large scale, particularly if the projects are indeed to be of equal benefit to the academic and the speaker community. There is much pressure on junior members of the academic linguistic profession, if to boot the documentation has to be pluri-disciplinary and multimedia.

[35] By the dozens over the years of the project, recruited in undergraduate courses such as "Introduction to linguistics" or "Languages of the world", skilled and eager to participate in a research project.

[36] Most noticeably the Council for Human Rights in Latin America of Oregon, Linguists for Nicaragua, and Witness for Peace.

ground of such larger scope projects, beyond facing the already strenuous concerns of the more technological aspects of documentation and archiving. And what was not raised explicitly but remains to be fully considered is the challenge to some collective professional thinking of how to best support the fieldworkers who have to balance the demands of both academia and the field, demands that are often contradictory and pressing, and always time and energy consuming beyond what is usually acknowledged by office- and library-bound linguists.

The second point was that it will always remain the professional linguists' responsibility to produce an analytical study of the language. That is what the profession is about at heart and what we must not lose sight of, particularly once we embark on wider community projects. This requires preparation in appropriate linguistics and field methodology.

As mentioned also, training speakers wherever and whenever possible should always be a priority, particularly to empower those speakers with native talents, as it is fundamentally more ethical to share our knowledge with those who are interested in it. And if one needs to drum up other arguments, one can also say that it opens up the possibility of sustainable work, particularly in wider scope documentation projects. Such projects are best conceived as genuinely collaborative, best handled by members of the community at the ground level, who will always have better opportunities to work with speakers that field linguists may not have access to. It would therefore appear to be an all around sound strategy. But it is unfortunately still too rarely embraced as the main approach, probably because it calls for a heavier time investment initially, because it may appear at first to slow down the process of gathering data for a description of the language, and because it demands much more personal investment on the fieldworker's part.

The third major point was the existence of a wide variety of speakers in endangered language communities, and the need to consider them all for the different types of information they can provide on the language, whether linguistic or sociolinguistic. It was noted that some awkwardness remains in the terminology in use, such as the terms old and young fluent speakers, semi-speakers, and terminal speakers, and intrinsic difficulty in establishing a typology was pointed out, as partly due to the many variables to be handled to account for the uniqueness of each speaker. It crucially called for great care in handling the pervasive condition of linguistic insecurity of the semi-speakers, for human reasons as much as for the sake of the reliability of data being collected.

On the background of this diversity of speakers, the next section emphasized the need to reconsider data-collecting methods. This could be said of all linguistic projects in any case, and of all linguistic field situations, but it was argued that such a reconsideration becomes crucial when dealing with endangered languages. For if the database to be produced is to remain the main information on the language for the future, it needs to be as complete as possible; and if the description is to capture the genius of the language and to do so with reliable data, the task is to collect natural language data. But as stated, this is not so easily done with speakers of endangered languages, and a variety of methods were proposed: mainly those of creating gatherings of speakers and of using various types of stimuli. While all the above may sound like common sense not worth writing about, it is obvious that it is not yet the practice of the majority of linguists, as evidenced by the type of data used in publications. Of course, this overall methodological approach is nothing new, but has been forgotten rather, as the task of linguistic fieldwork has passed from an anthropological tradition more attentive to such issues, to strictly linguistic circles dominated by a certain approach to theory building bent on the notions of native intuition and ideal speaker.

The last section presented a case study of one project of language description and revitalization that served the purpose of illustrating how some of the issues raised earlier in the chapter played themselves out in a particular situation, as unique as all endangered field situations can be, but also as universal as they are in their complexity. In the end, it is hoped that these notes on one of the many aspects of fieldwork on endangered languages will provide material for a necessary confrontation of our discipline with some of the realities of the work it wants to promote.

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