Interdisciplinary research in language documentation

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This paper explores the parameters of interdisciplinary work in language documentation. Citing the strong call for the involvement of disciplines, other than linguistics, beginning with Himmelmann, to the present trajectories for language documentation research, the author claims that more attention is needed to the enactment of interdisciplinary work from project conception to the follow-through in terms of where to disseminate outcome.

1. The Past   I was lucky. My early fieldwork experience, as a first-year graduate student, was guided by an oral history project under which I was supposed to collect some 'native language.' This allowed me to get some experience with data collection of various types and to see a wider range of texts than if the task had been straight descriptive linguistics. This experience led to a career as a linguistic anthropologist, where the concept of interdisciplinary work has never been far from my thoughts. Linguistics, when I was a graduate student in the late 1960s, was still considered a sub-field of anthropology in the United States and a required subject for anthropology majors. As such, it was strongly rooted in descriptive linguistics, as put forth by Bloomfield (1934) and the Structuralist era that followed. Linguistic fieldwork, in the Boasian tradition of creating grammars, texts and dictionaries, was still the norm. As Evans points out, this trilogy, while useful, "will not supply all the questions that future linguists and community members will want to ask" (2010:223). Against this backdrop, students of linguistic anthropology proceeded to describe languages with a focus on the transcription and analysis of collected primary data from unwritten languages. These same students also studied language use and practices, the more anthropological side of the equation, quite independently of any linguistic description. While the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology were generally seen as closely related, the nature of that relationship did not seem clearly defined, at least to me. One could do a lot of descriptive linguistics without much, if any, appeal to the more anthropological concerns of how people might actually use the language in given situations and for different purposes.

There evolved parallel areas of research—a strong tradition of careful language descriptions sometimes in concert with, but not blended with, anthropological perspectives on language.[1] I think that to most of us, who had been trained in descriptive linguistics, the entrance of language documentation was truly eye-opening and welcome.

What I find most interesting about Himmelmann's early writings is that, from the beginning, language documentation mandates an interdisciplinary approach. The door to that is heavily messaged in his article, "Documentary and Descriptive Linguistics" (1998), beginning with this point that, "Language descriptions are, in general, useful only to grammatically oriented and comparative linguists. Collections of primary data have at least the potential of being of use to a larger group of interested parties. These include the speech community itself, which might be interested in a record of its linguistic practices and traditions" (1998:63). He adds that a set of primary data may be of interest to various other (sub-)disciplines, including sociolinguistics, anthropology, discourse analysis, oral history, etc. This, of course, presupposes that the data set contains data and information amenable to the research methodologies of these disciplines (1998:163). This last point has become increasingly important as interdisciplinary work in language documentation has evolved and is even more in focus for the future, as I will comment on below. As well, the mention of data being of interest to the speech community itself, while not revolutionary, was certainly overdue, and spoke to the need to 'give back' and share outcomes. How different my early linguistic fieldwork experience might have been if I had been trained to think more broadly and how interesting it is, at this juncture, to think about how language documentation so clearly, and so deeply, embraces interdisciplinary work.

The mandate to include multiple disciplines is clearly spelled out in the statement that a language documentation should include a "comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community" (Himmelmann 1998:166). While it is possible to consider language structure and language use within the field of linguistics, the notion of documenting 'linguistic practices' broadly goes beyond the strict documentation of linguistic forms and aims to understand that the documentation of language must be broad enough to consider language structure and use *related* to changing topics, events, places, individuals and more. Even further, Himmelmann writes that "a language documentation aims at the record of the linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community" (1998:166). Specifically, he adds that the "makeup and contents of a language documentation are determined and influenced by a broad variety of language related (sub-disciplines) including: sociological and anthropological approaches to language … 'hardcore' linguistics (theoretical, comparative, descriptive); discourse analysis, spoken language research, rhetoric; language acquisition; phonetics; ethics, language rights, and language planning; field methods; oral literature and oral history; corpus linguistics; educational linguistics" (1998:167). The list has grown since then. Himmelmann adds, "The major theoretical challenge for documentary linguistics is the task of synthesizing a coherent framework for language documentation from all of these disciplines" (1998:167) And, it is this final point that has presented the greatest challenge to interdisciplinary studies within the framework of language documentation.

Thus, the trajectory from descriptive linguistics to language documentation, at its core, has taken us from a single focused exercise in describing any given language, to a multi-faceted effort, inclusive of the description but moving beyond it, casting a wider net that encompasses language-related practices and the various disciplines that might interface

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[1]For further insights on this see Epps et al. (2017).

with them. The strength and opportunity provided by expanding language documentation projects into other disciplines was obvious from the beginning and, as noted above, so were the anticipated challenges.

2. The Present   I will take 'the present' to be roughly from 1998, the time of Himmelmann's seminal article defining language documentation, to the time of this writing in 2018. Language documentation has advanced at a steady pace to a fully recognized, stand alone, new field of study in a relatively short time period. The interest in interdisciplinary perspectives has intensified and somewhat changed over this period of time. We can simply reflect on this growth by looking at the papers written for two significant publications that took place during this period: The first is *The Essentials of Language Documentation* (2006), edited by Jost Gippert, Nikolaus Himmelmann and Ulrike Mosel; the second, *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Fieldwork* (2012), edited by Nicholas Thieberger.

In the 2006 volume, the papers were still tightly tied to the mechanics of performing language documentation, for the most part. Understandably, the advent of advanced technology marks one of the biggest shifts distinguishing language documentation. More sophisticated technology and the ability to digitally store, analyze and managed bulks of data continues to be one of the interesting challenges of the field. Early on, there was an intense focus on what technology brought to the table and on how to best use it. In 2006, the field, as a whole, was still working through the challenges of new recording possibilities, new data management issues, and new spins on what technology brought to descriptive work, such as E-MELD.[2] Papers such as, "Data and language documentation" (Austin), "Documenting lexical knowledge" (Haviland), "Linguistic annotation" (Schultze-Berndt), "Archiving challenges" (Trilsbeek & Wittenburg) were indicative of this. There were also indicators of the interdisciplinary work and considerations of speech communities evident in this early volume, note the papers about "Ethics and practicalities of cooperative fieldwork and analysis" (Dwyer), "Ethnography in language documentation (Franchettto), and "Fieldwork and community language work" (Mosel). At the same time, those who were engaged in fieldwork were increasingly experimenting with interdisciplinary applications through the lens of language documentation. That trend grew markedly by 2012.

In Thieberger's 2012 book, the papers still address issues in data recording and management, but many reflect broader trends in the interpretation of language documentation as a site for interdisciplinary studies. It is almost as if, once the field became more comfortable with and set parameters for the technical issues, it could turn its attention to the integration of more disciplines. The papers, under a section titled, "Recording Performance," reflect this shift, for example, "Reasons for Documenting Gestures and Suggestions for How to go about it "(Seyfeddinipur), "Including music and temporal arts in language documentation" (Barwick), "The language of food" (Pollock), "Botanical collecting" (Conn) , "Fieldwork in ethnomathematics" (Chemillier), "Cultural Astronomy for linguists" (Holbrook), "Geography: Documenting terms for Landscape features," (Turk, Mark, O'Meara, and Stea), Topononymy: Recording and Analyzing Place Names in a language area." (Nash and Simpson).

The papers included in the 2012 volume definitely speak to how disciplines, other than linguistics, can clearly dovetail with language documentation. However, most

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[2]E-MELD was a five-year project designed to preserve language data and documentation through the development of infrastructure for electronic archives. `http://emeld.org/`

of these articles describe how fieldwork practices are manifested for other disciplines and might overlap in certain ways within a language documentation project. This provided insights to language documenters but reflects a time, though recent, when the field was still coming to terms with how interdisciplinary projects are conceived and carried out. For example, Barwick (2012:171) justifies the documenting of musical genres appealing to Himmelmann's early call for documenting 'ritual speech events' (1998:179) and also reminds the reader, through Woodbury's words, that "documenters take advantage of any opportunity to record, videotape, or otherwise document instances of language use" (Woodbury, 2003:48). Music seems like an easier stretch for documenting since the methods of data collection should be the same. This contrasts with the efforts to understand what other academic disciplines bring to the field in the way of methods and practices that might intersect or conflict with those of language documenters. McClatchey's paper, "Ethnobiology: Basic methods for documenting biological knowledge represented in language," focuses on techniques for biological data collection and much more. Again, it provides excellent insights into how the documenting of biological information takes shape and that information is certainly helpful to language documenters. But it describes how biologists might do the work along side linguists but not how biologists and language documenters might work together with a single data set or how they might choose to enact the collection of data in a community context. Clearly, the field has embraced Himmelmann's directive to document 'language practices' and has taken to heart the advantages of interdisciplinary work within the context of language documentation. However, there is still room to grow in the direction of achieving integrated interdisciplinary language documentation projects.

With all of this good work coming forward, it is interesting that, at present, even though language documentation encourages an interdisciplinary approach, there has been little discussion about the actual complexities of making that happen. What we cannot glean from the above examples is how interdisciplinary projects are constructed in terms of data collecting, how researchers negotiate more than one field—from theory to method, how decisions are made in the field and afterward in relation to the sharing of outcomes. Further, we need to be more clear about the ethical considerations that come into play when working with other disciplines while engaged with the speaking community(s) involved.

In an effort to get at some of those considerations, a speaker series was sponsored by the National Science Foundation at the 3rd International Conference of Language Documentation and Conservation in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 2013. Four speakers, all language documenters who were engaged in linguistic fieldwork with researchers from four very different disciplines, were asked to reflect on the experience of constructing interdisciplinary projects. The speaker's series featured Jonathan Amith's work on ethnobotany with Nahuatl in Mexico, Birgit Hellwig's study of child language acquisition in Papua New Guinea; Jeff Good's work in Cameroon in partnership with an anthropologist on areal linguistics, and Niclas Burenhult's research on landscape and semantic domains in Malaysia. There were some generalities each researcher discussed:

1. There are sometimes competing goals that cause problems in the field. Burenhult (forthcoming) asks, "How do researchers reconcile the goals of their documentation projects with the both the theoretical and practical goals of the other disciplines involved?"

2. There may be similar goals, but conflicting methodologies. Hellwig (forthcoming) notes that, even though there was a great need for language acquisition studies in the context of language documentation, "Child language studies require experimentation and longitudinal data which are not part of classic language documentation."

3. It is really necessary to make an effort to understand the partnering researcher and their field to a greater degree than might be expected.

4. Determining how to integrate disciplines in a single project should be established at the outset.

In spite of the challenges, language documentation continues to be a fertile place for interdisciplinary work to grow and researchers in language documentation do understand the advantages. Among them are: 1) The opportunity to bring a different set of research questions to the same project data; 2) Funding agencies realize more research outcomes for their money in such broader-based research; and 3) Multi-faceted project designs which create fuzzy boundaries, which can be a good thing; such designs even create new disciplines.

I believe it is important for language documenters to look more closely at the history, details and application of interdisciplinary work broadly and then bring that understanding into a language documentation framework. A classic definition can help understand how to approach this:

> Interdisciplinary research is a mode of research by teams or individuals that integrates information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of specialized knowledge to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of research practice. (National Academic Press 2004)

Too often, the temptation is to construct a good documentation project and then add a research team or individual colleague from another field to broaden the perspective, perhaps, with the hope of making the project more attractive to funding agencies. Or, sometimes linguists try to go it alone—such as perhaps using a handy botanical guide to fill in the interdisciplinary blanks. Both of these approaches have been tried often, and usually fail to provide a valid picture. Truly strong research projects are conceived of with interdisciplinary perspectives in mind from the beginning. Research questions are mutually conceived. The key concept is always *integration*. Researchers must ask themselves what this truly means as it can be very complex. A well constructed interdisciplinary project integrates both theory and practice from each participating field. Roles for the participating disciplines are well-defined and the outcomes are jointly presented. (If more than one discipline is involved, but the methods and outcomes stand as separate entities, then the project may be 'multi-disciplinary' or 'cross-disciplinary' but it is not interdisciplinary). Examples of newer approaches are specifically found in articles by Jonathan Amith and Jeff Good in Penfield (forthcoming).

There are three defining aspects of true interdisciplinary research: 1) that the varying disciplines are joined early in the planning process and 'integrated' in terms of theoretical and practical input to the targeted research. (There are some exceptions, especially true of language documentation I think, where a second or third discipline might join a project

later when the data reveals the need for it. This was noted by Evans in 2012 when he outlined the 'strategies for interdisciplinary fieldwork' (185). 2) that interdisciplinary projects have the potential to form whole new disciplines and, as such, 3) they must, in some way, meet the goals for the research design of each discipline involved. That is, they must adhere to the vision that the central purpose is to solve problems not resolved by one discipline alone. This entails the need to compromise and develop a 'collaborative personality' as noted by Jeff Good (forthcoming) as well as any ethical concerns for each discipline. At present, it seems to me, there there is still a need for training of researchers in understanding the parameters and procedures that must govern a true interdisciplinary project. Academic institutions have not done their part in making this possible and, in the future, that needs to change.

3. The Future

> "*We are not students of some subject matter, but students of problems. And problems may cut right across the borders of any subject matter or discipline.*" (Popper 1963:88)

Because research questions posed in language documentation frequently "cut right across the borders…," we can expect that interdisciplinary research in this field will be around for a long time. However, the reality is that researchers are bound to academic institution and while academic institutions often claim to support interdisciplinary work, they are, in fact, structured precisely in ways that make it difficult. Our academic culture is largely based on strong disciplinary boundaries, reinforced by professional societies, institutional hierarchies, and publication sources and requirements.

Rhoten & Parker (2004: 6) write,

> "The fact is, universities have tended to approach interdisciplinarity as a trend rather than a real transition and to thus undertake their interdisciplinary efforts in a piecemeal, incoherent, catch-as-catch-can fashion rather than approaching them as comprehensive, root-and-branch reforms. As a result, the ample monies devoted to the cause of interdisciplinarity, and the ample energies of scientists directed toward its goals, have accomplished far less than they could, or should, have."

This has been the background of interdisciplinary studies, but I do think change is coming. There is a dynamic that must change: there are funding agencies which request and support interdisciplinary projects (understanding their great potential), and there are the researchers who desire to do them with the hope of bridging disciplines in 'out of the box' ways and seek support from funding agencies but, in the middle, are institutions which stifle such efforts because of their structure alone. These are often more expensive projects, but they don't have to be. Small collaborative projects can also be envisioned around very targeted interdisciplinary research questions. In any case, for change to occur, some of the things that will have to be addressed are:

a) The university 'silos' need to change. Russell (1991) writes that before the advent of the modern university in the 1870's, institutions of higher learning were built on a single discourse model, with a uniform set of values shared between teachers and students. After the modern university, based on the German model, was established,

the academic discourse community became fragmented (21). Academia became "...a collection of discrete communities, an aggregate of competing professional disciplines, each with its own specialized written discourse." (5). It is unrealistic to suggest a change back to a single discourse community but it may be possible to break down some of the silo walls, to create a more fluid communication and working relationship across disciplines.

b) Journals and other avenues of publication need to also be more willing to publish interdisciplinary research. Most are also constrained by the 'silo' effect. Researchers are challenged by where to publish, how to write (across disciplines) and how to engage audiences from other fields. Since publication is still the basis for success in tenure-track positions, this makes it ill advised to suggest that assistant professors undertake interdisciplinary projects.

c) A restructuring of the university from the administrative management side This is the only way to begin to bridge disciplines within a given institution. This includes financial support for interdisciplinary programs.

d) Department-to-department initiatives need to be encouraged. Colloquia, conferences, inter- and intra-departmental events of all types can be used as discussion points for how interdisciplinary research might proceed for everyone's benefit. Much depends on how researchers see themselves in relation to their discipline and how willing they are to push their own limits. Agreements across academic departments or programs can be complicated. Jeff Good comments:

> Effective interdisciplinary research often requires collaborators to gain fairly deep knowledge about how practitioners of other disciplines collect and theorize on their data, and may further result in academic outputs that are neither fish nor fowl, as it were, in terms of disciplinary evaluation. Is a culturally informed collection of place names ... an instance of linguistics, anthropology, or geography? Questions like this do not merely provide interesting intellectual puzzles. They can have real-world consequences given the fact that disciplines do not merely exist to provide a convenient way to categorize different methods of inquiry but are also embedded within the institutional structures which support scholarship. (forthcoming)

e) Training opportunities are needed to teach researchers how to find colleagues with the interest and expertise needed to partner for these projects, how to negotiate the shared responsibilities, how to integrate the relevant areas of theory and practice, how to find funding and where to disseminate outcomes. There may also be theoretical or methodological challenges leading to problems in both the conception of and implementation of the research in question. Language documentation fieldwork carries with it an established methodology for data collection and ethical rules of engagement with community partners which may not be shared or recognized by the participating discipline. The definition of 'fieldwork' itself might differ from that in other disciplines and certainly fieldwork methodologies can differ and become a source of conflict. Issues also tend to arise around data management and ownership. For these reasons specifically, a designated interdisciplinary research team needs to address and anticipate as many

of these things in advance when possible. Ethical considerations also must be addressed across disciplines and in engagement with the speech community. There are training opportunities in place for linguistic fieldwork to begin to address all of these issues, most notably, The Institute on Collaborative Language Research (CoLang), to be held next at the University of Montana in 2020.

The most important consideration is that interdisciplinary projects can take longer to establish, fund and enact. Researchers must be prepared to recognize this time / energy commitment. Finding funding, alone, can be time intensive. It can, however, certainly be worth it. In larger agencies, interdisciplinary projects usually require co-review from the participating programs, adding to the complexity and timing, but possibly also garnering more funding. Smaller, very focused interdisciplinary projects may be fundable through private foundations as well.

In the end, my belief remains that language documentation projects are inherently richer when they take on interdisciplinary characteristics, as reflected in Himmelmann's early vision. Around well-designed research questions, the same data gathered at least doubles in value when it serves more than one discipline. This translates to a richer source of information for researchers but, even more importantly, provides the speech communities with more layers of well-documented aspects of their cultures and languages for posterity.

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