

ELDERS, LANGUAGE ADVOCATES, AND LINGUISTS II  
A VIEW FROM A STUDENT FIELD LINGUIST

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When Greg Bigler and I first began discussing the subject of how academia defines Indians and Indian communities, I started to examine some of the definitions of myself and my trade that I have learned during my training in linguistics and linguistic fieldwork, and how these learned definitions came into conflict with my experience in the Euchee/Yuchi community. Of course, as explained in all linguistics field methods courses on the first day of class, classroom experience in eliciting forms and analyzing texts is nowhere near preparation for what actually occurs in the field. However, there are, as Greg has discussed, certain definitions we are taught, whether explicitly or not, which we academicians need to examine frankly and work towards changing. In addition, there are styles and methods of teaching future field workers which can better prepare them for work in Indian and other minority language communities. We can begin redefining ourselves in the classroom. While this discussion centers around my experience in one Indian community, I believe that similar situations exist in all minority language communities.

For several years now the definition of the linguist as a 'savior' of endangered languages has been actively challenged. By and large this definition by linguists is changing. We realize that a linguist alone cannot save a language, that it takes the whole community. This means we must go beyond the speaker and linguist, and involve the children, the young adults, parents, families, teachers, sitters (so common in Indian homes where parents work), the traditional decision makers, the ceremonial grounds, the churches. In short, everyone and the whole community, for that is where language is used. The savior-type also tends to be associated with personalities that control, and that often leads to the linguist having sole possession of knowledge about the language and materials on the language. Most field linguists today are acutely aware of the needs of the communities and try to give something back. We realize, too, that such an attitude results in patronization and the ill-feelings associated with that type of interaction.

Yet, in a way, the savior self-definition hasn't changed much. Perhaps we prefer 'expert' today. The attitude is still fostered every time students, or experienced linguists, pick a project, do all their background research, write a grant (or don't), and show up at the door of the tribe. In what other field, certainly not business or in academia, would people be able to present themselves, uninvited, as the expert who has come to do an important job, and expect immediate agreement and cooperation? Greg has outlined the affect of this within a community and to the researcher: the researcher is quietly not allowed to do work in that community. Today, many tribes are asserting their rights to refuse access to linguists with whom they do not feel comfortable, or if they do not share a common goal of active language maintenance and rejuvenation, or if they simply do not want a linguist around. And if they do want a linguist, they should be able to choose the person who will spend significant time in their community. We must begin teaching students that fieldwork is a cooperative venture, from the first contact on. This means that we need to train students how to seek out which tribes are interested in working with a linguist. A good place for both linguists and communities to start is the Endangered Languages Survey by the Linguistics Society of America, prepared by the Society for studying of indigenous languages of the Americas. Also, the Linguist List, a growing list of linguists with their background experience and research goals available at the Native American Languages Institute in Choctaw, Oklahoma. Information about where and how to get placed on these lists should be made available. And the place to start is in the classroom, where students should be taught that the process of contacting tribes or entities within tribes to request employment is a necessary initial step. We should look at the first step as being here and not the library. Students are often taught

the whole process of seeking employment in academia, but we do not engage fieldwork students with the same concerns

The 'expert' definition is closely related to the idea that the researcher is the 'possessor of knowledge'. This is fostered in academia, I may say implanted in us through the nature of academia. Knowledge is a precious commodity. We don't like sharing it, unless we are sure that the credit will be ours. And we don't like sharing it while it is in process. However, if we are to work responsibly within a community, we must, no matter what the nature of our research, return something to the community. In most Indian communities, this means helping with language revival and maintenance programs of some kind. To be successful, this entails working with a Language Team, presumably including the linguist(s) and those interested in learning and/or teaching the language along with speakers and elders, so that the community is involved with the project, and equally as important with the collection and analyzing of the data. It is my strong belief that the field linguist needs to be involved in training community members in basic linguistics. In other words, we should leave behind not only a grammar or dictionary, but community members who can continue collection, analysis, developing teaching materials, and such long after we are gone. This holds several consequences for the 'possessor of knowledge', as one has to concede sole ownership of knowledge.

There is another consequence in relinquishing knowledge in particular that I have found personally to be a problem. Communities where there are only a few speakers, most of whom are elderly, need information about their languages fast. I found that I was often hesitant about giving information that I was not one hundred percent sure of yet. I did not want to give information that could be later found incorrect. I did not want to undermine people's trust in me, and I certainly did not want to confuse people with changing analyses. Knowing the nature of language to be much more intricate than often appears at first, I would hesitate to be conclusive. We are taught to be meticulous, and this is good instruction. But we also need to balance the immediate needs of the community with perfection. Linguists must be able to relinquish knowledge responsibly as the community needs it. This is certainly an ethical issue that needs to be addressed and discussed in field methods classes. It is ethical to provide complete and accurate information but it is only ethical to assist the community in a timely manner.

Part of this can be solved with the Language Team approach, where community members are part of the language analysis. The Team is able to experience the process of figuring out how a language works. By being involved in this process, then a working hypothesis will feel just that—working. Not infallible, and open to change if necessary, but still able to help people's learning the language. Then, also, the Team is attuned to new data and become more and more a part of the process of developing a complete grammar and teaching materials.

I admit to having had a very romantic view of being a field worker. I call this definition the 'solitary field linguist'. I thought I would be alone, working quietly and steadily, always working. I pictured in my mind how Mary Haas must have worked—just her and her consultants for hours. But I have rarely been alone in Euchee Country. Outside of travel time, I can count only one time. Part of this is due to the generosity of the Euchee community and in particular Greg's family, which has housed, entertained, fed, and even clothed me for several years now. Part of it is due to the nature of Euchee culture, which is much more family and community-oriented than my own. And part of it is the nature of working in an endangered language community. There are only a handful of fluent Euchee speakers who are physically able to do linguistic work with me. These are the same people that are also needed to help in the Master-Apprenticeship program. There are simply not enough speakers and not enough time for me to work separately. I feel it is imperative to invite the people who are interested in learning the language along with me when I am collecting data. Although my approach is different than someone who is trying to learn the language more naturally, it is still a little more time in contact with the language for the apprentices. It is also more natural to have several people sitting around talking about, or in, the language than just me and a

consultant. It may not have gone how I planned that day--I didn't move directly from point A to point B, but inevitably my data has been better. This is going to be necessary in more and more communities. It is simply not the place of the linguist to take valuable meeting time away from community people.

Having people along while doing my research and working in a Team to do analysis is certainly contrary to my training. Not just as a linguist, but since I entered public school I have been expected to work alone, I have always been tested alone, I have always written papers alone. Yet everything about field work has required group work and cooperation. I am not suggesting that linguistics can change the nature of academia, but we can change the nature of our linguistic training to reflect the requirements of field work in tribal communities around the world. Field methods classes, for example, should require group work, not just where the analysis is discussed together but written up separately, but where even the finished product is a group effort including that of the speaker. I suggest that even in the elicitation of data, that students work in groups to decide what they want to work on that day. Perhaps the ambitious instructor can require students to work with a lay person or persons in the development of alphabets and explanations of grammatical concepts. Akira Yamamoto teaches a course at the University of Kansas that focuses on rewriting existing grammars to be understandable to the everyday speaker of that language. This has been a difficult yet invaluable skill.

In closing, there is much we can do within the linguistic community and linguistic training to redefine ourselves, and to better work within the definitions and goals of Indian communities. I have come to realize that the best definition of a field linguist working in an endangered language community is coworker (or perhaps Team member) and advisor. The balancing act for me has not necessarily been trying to fulfill the different needs of different members of the community -- the elders, the language advocates, the different political and family groups, the linguist--although that is there, too. For me the balancing act has been between two definitions of linguist: one that has me at the center as expert and sole decision maker of analyses and creator of papers that I must live by in academia to succeed in my field, and one that has me out of the center as the member of the Language Team and language advisor (never decision maker) for my success in the Euchee community and more importantly for the success of language programs in the community.

At the recent Oklahoma Native Language Use Conference in Preston, Oklahoma, sponsored by the Euchee Language Class of Sapulpa and Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, people who are active in revitalizing their languages (Comanche, Choctaw, Creek, Delaware, Euchee, Cherokee, Oneida, Prairie Band Potawatomi, and I'm sure I'm missing some) came together and shared strategies, insights, frustrations, and a lot of food! At one session, I heard the comment, "Linguists think they are experts but they have to check all of their work with the speakers." This shocked me because the nature of our work requires checking, requires fluent speakers, requires work with others. It made me stop and think how little, at times, we understand each other, and how far we need to go in communicating our methods and goals to those who are affected by it the most. And to change some of our methods and goals to better fit those of the communities we work with. Definitions change through time, and our self-definitions must change for this time.