

Ethical Dilemmas in Documenting the Kwoma Language

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Abstract

This paper discusses ethical issues that arose while documenting Kwoma, an endangered language spoken by approximately four thousand speakers in the East-Sepik province of Papua New Guinea. More specifically, it addresses questions related to the recording and archiving of sensitive ritual and ceremonial materials that the community wishes to preserve, but that the researcher cannot access. Yet, it is in the interest of the community that these texts be recorded, and minimally transcribed and translated, to preserve this traditional heritage. However, by agreeing to become a member of the community, the author of this paper has decided to embrace the Kwoma traditions and as a woman, cannot be in contact with these cultural elements, at the risk of causing emotional distress and break her bonds with other members of the clan. The article discusses the ways in which the researcher can bridge linguists' professional interests and the community's expectations.

Résumé

Cet article discute des questions éthiques qui se sont posées lors de la documentation du kwoma, une langue en voie de disparition parlée par environ quatre mille locuteurs dans la Province East-Sepik de la Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée. Plus particulièrement, il aborde des questions à propos de l'enregistrement et l'archivage des matériaux délicats de rituels et de cérémonies que la communauté souhaite conserver mais auxquels la chercheuse ne peut pas accéder. Il est pourtant dans l'intérêt de la communauté que ces textes soient enregistrés et au minimum transcrits et traduits afin de conserver ce patrimoine traditionnel. Toutefois, en s'engageant à devenir membre de la communauté, l'auteur du présent article a décidé d'adopter les traditions kwoma et, en tant que femme, ne peut pas être en contact avec ces éléments culturels, au risque de provoquer la détresse émotionnelle et de rompre ses liens avec d'autres membres du clan. L'article discute donc les moyens par lesquels la chercheuse peut établir un rapprochement entre les intérêts professionnels des linguistes et les attentes de la communauté.

Introduction

Language documentation ideally documents all aspects of a language, that is to say, the primary data should represent the widest possible range of speech productions. However, the content of a recorded narrative can often present problems related to the sensitivity of native speakers. It is then important to balance accessibility to resources with the concerns of the speech community. This article addresses this question by exploring a particular situation that happened to me during my work documenting the Kwoma language, an endangered language of Papua New Guinea. Many ethical dilemmas arose during my fieldwork in the village of Tongwinjamb. As a woman, I was forbidden access to ceremonial linguistic material and other ritual artefacts. Nevertheless, in the context of the preservation and conservation of their language, the speech community expressed their desire for these elements to be recorded, documented, and archived for the future. This situation raises the question of the accessibility of these data. In this article, I wish to present the solutions I proposed to resolve these ethical problems.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section addresses the question of language documentation and discusses issues related to collaborative research and the responsibilities of researchers documenting a language. The second section presents the Kwoma language and culture, including information about clan division, gender ideology, and rituals and ceremonies. The final section describes my experience in documenting the

Kwoma language. I introduce the ethical concerns that arose during my fieldwork in the village of Tongwinjamb and present two possible answers to these concerns, namely a) to collaborate with a male associate to access and analyze the forbidden texts, and b) to archive these texts accompanied with complete contextual and ethnographic information, restricting their access to the appropriate community members.

Language documentation

The interest in recent years for endangered languages, promoted since 2006 by the UNESCO *Convention for the protection and promotion of cultural diversity*, has led to a paradigm of research devoted to the preservation and conservation of intangible heritage languages.

Linguists studying under-described languages are traditionally called "field linguists," that is to say, researchers who analyze data collected directly within the language community. However, from the perspective of linguistic description, the data usually remain the property of the sole linguist who has collected the data. Given the urgency to protect linguistic diversity, this has gradually changed. Over the past decade, a new approach to research in linguistics, now known as *Language Documentation*, developed. This approach specifically focuses on the collection and analysis of primary linguistic data in order to preserve and make them accessible to all. Language documentation is the first step towards the preservation and even the revitalization of endangered indigenous languages.

Language documentation as a branch of linguistics has been theorized in particular by Himmelmann (1998, 2006) and Woodbury (2003). It is defined by Himmelmann (2006) as “a lasting multipurpose record of a language” (p. 1). As such, it is concerned with the production of lasting audio, video, and written records of a language. The primary purpose of this discipline is to collect primary data documenting the practices of a speech community. The documentation should ideally cover as many aspects of language as possible and must be enriched with annotations and ultimately analyses.

It is clear that within this research paradigm, it is no longer possible for the linguist to work independently of the community where the language is spoken. Thus, the linguist is not the only person responsible for the research but a partner working in collaboration with community members.

Collaborative research

Language documentation most of the time emerges from the contact between a linguist and the linguistic community, and materializes with the linguist’s desire to document a language for which little linguistic documentation exists, whether this language is highly endangered or not. Nevertheless, it has become a given that linguistic research must also serve the interests of the community whose language is being documented. This type of research has been referred to as *participatory action research*, *community-based research*, *community-centered research*, *collaborative research*, and other similar terms (e.g. Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009; Dobrin, 2008; Mosel, 2006; Rice, 2011).

Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) proposes a collaborative research model between the researcher and the linguistic community defined as follows: “Research that is *on* a language, and that is conducted *for*, *with*, and *by* the language speaking community within which the research takes place and which it affects” (p. 24). The Centre for Community Based Research (http://www.communitybasedresearch.ca/Page/View/CBR_definition.html; accessed 5 July 2013) identifies three major aspects of this type of research

- *Community situated*: research begins with a topic of practical relevance to the community (as opposed to individual scholars) and is carried out in a community setting.
- *Collaborative*: community members and researchers equitably share control of the research agenda through active and reciprocal involvement in the research design, implementation, and dissemination.
- *Action-oriented*: the process and results are useful to community members in making positive social change and promoting social equity.

Adopting a model of collaborative research implies a sharing of knowledge between the linguist and speakers that will benefit the community. It also implies that the

researcher assumes a number of responsibilities towards the linguistic community, but also to other scholars.

Responsibilities

Responsibilities can be conflicting at times. On the one hand, field linguists have the responsibility to help with language preservation and revitalization efforts through careful fieldwork, documentation, and description. On the other hand, researchers have an ethical obligation to respect the wishes of the speech community with regard to the language materials. Yet, the linguist and the language community may have their own priorities and agendas (see Gerdtts, 2010; Grinevald, 2001; Rice, 2009; Stebbins, 2013). As partners in the research enterprise, it is the responsibility of both parties to negotiate the goals of the project.

Different cultural contexts entail different community expectations about the relationship between the researcher and the researched language community (see for example Dobrin, 2008 and Holton, 2009). In the following section, I will describe the Kwoma community, their language, and some cultural facts to better understand the people considerations about the documentation of their language.

Kwoma

The Kwoma are located in the Ambunti Sub-Province of the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea. The people are divided into two dialect groups. One is located in the Washkuk Hills, and members identify themselves as “Kwoma,” or “hill people”; the other is situated to the north and west of the Washkuk range and members refer to themselves as “Nukuma,” or “headwater people.” Linguists give the name Kwoma to the language as a whole and Nukuma to its northern dialect.

Kwoma is one of ninety or so distinct Papuan or Non-Austronesian languages that make up the Sepik-Ramu Phylum, and it is spoken by approximately 4,000 speakers, scattered in seven villages. Even if Kwoma is the language of a relatively high number of people, only few of them, mostly women and children, speak it in everyday life. This situation is imputable to many factors (prestige of the dominant language Tok Pisin, mixed marriages, and migrations out of the villages). Few speak English. These facts suggest that Kwoma is an endangered language of Papua New Guinea.

Clan division

Each Kwoma village is composed of a large number of small patrilineal and patrilocal exogamous clans. The total number of clans is probably between sixty and eighty. Formerly, warfare did not take place between clans in the same tribe, but such groups were (and still are) widely believed to practice homicidal sorcery against each other, and men openly refer to the members of all other clans, including those in the same tribe, as ‘enemies’

In theory, members of a single clan trace descent by known agnatic links from a common, named, human male forbear. Some clans are linked through their founders to other exogamous groups, but such larger patrilineal units are not named and do not unite for action in any context. Each clan “owns” a large number of totems, principally plants and animal species. Totemic species are classified as either “male” or “female”: “male” species (e.g., different types of fish) provide the majority of men’s names, “female” species (e.g., most birds, including the cassowary and birds of paradise) the majority of women’s names. Clans that share the same or similar sets of totems form named divisions of classes; such divisions cross village, tribal, and even linguistic boundaries. Members of clans in the same totemic division regard each other as kin. A person’s other major class of relatives are those by marriage. People who are neither kin nor relatives are “unrelated” or “strangers.”

Gender ideology

One of the very common, and probably universal, social corollaries of the idea that males are both different from and intrinsically superior to females is the belief that men, because of their sex, have greater access to, and in a sense are symbolically closer to, those powers that maintain and underpin the social and cosmic order (see for example Owens, 2002). In the Kwoma society, this idea is expressed ritually through the periodic performance by men (and exclusively by men) of rites designed to ensure the continuing fertility of economically important game animals or crops. Women on the other hand, because of their sex, are thought not only to be intrinsically unsuited to participate in such rites (and thus hold positions of ritual authority) but are seen as being hostile and inimical to their very purposes. For this reason they are either excluded from such ceremonies, or only permitted to participate in them in minor or secondary roles.

Rituals and ceremonies

In common with other societies in the region, the Kwoma economy is based on sago, which grows wild. The most highly prized food, however, is not sago, but yam, and the harvesting of this cultivated crop provides the focus of all major Kwoma rituals.

As elsewhere in the Sepik, rituals are performed in the large ceremonial houses also called “spirit houses” or “men’s houses” located at the centre, and generally on the highest points, of villages. Kwoma ceremonial houses are open at both ends, and structurally consist of nothing more than steeply-pitched roofs supported by posts. Here is a photograph I took in 2007 of the ceremonial spirit house in the village of Tongwinjamb.



Picture 1. Spirit house in the village of Tongwinjamb

The Kwoma hold a cycle of three distinct ceremonies annually in association with the harvesting of yams. In each, men display different styles of painted and decorated wooden sculptures depicting powerful clan spirits (the agents thought responsible for the continuing fertility of yam gardens) and dance around these sculptures singing complex song cycles that celebrate memorable events in the histories of individual clans. Previously, Kwoma performed a separate yam-planting ceremony, but this ritual has now been abandoned. The three ceremonies—*yena*, *mija* and *nowkwi*—are each associated with a different style of sculpture. The sculptures represent three types of powerful ‘spirits’. Before they are displayed, the carvings are painted with clan design.

During *yena*, women are prohibited from going anywhere near the men’s house in which the ceremony is taking place. During *mija*, they are permitted to dance outside at the front, but only after the men have placed a screen of leaves across the entrance to the building to prevent them from seeing inside. The men deliberately construct the screen in such a way, however, that the women can just see the uppermost sections of the two sculptures over the top of it. By doing this they consciously endeavour (as they themselves say) to taunt and tantalise the women with a glimpse of the mysteries to which only they have privileged access. Women are also permitted to dance outside at the front of a men’s house during *nowkwi*, but they are separated from the proceedings inside by a much taller screen than the one used during *mija*; this entirely surrounds the building and prevents them from seeing not only the figures displayed but also the men’s house itself. During all three ceremonies men dance around the displays singing myths or songs celebrating incidents of note from the histories of individual clans and tribes.

For the whole duration of a ceremony, people not entitled to participate are required to stay well away from the men’s house in which it is being performed. Women’s participation in rituals is limited to dancing and singing outside men’s houses on specific ceremonial occasions. The songs and narratives used in these three Kwoma rituals are completely forbidden access for

members of other clans. In addition, every aspect of the *yena* ceremony are forbidden for women.

Documenting the Kwoma language

As reported by Dixon (1991:230), the biggest need for documentation among the Pacific languages lies in the Papuan families. Moreover, the languages of the Sepik basin of New Guinea are “in urgent need of linguistic work” (Aikhenvald, 2004: 100). My research project aimed at diminishing this lack of documentation. It was concerned with the documentation and description of the Kwoma language. The project involved data collection that could only be completed through fieldwork. Fieldtrips to the Kwoma land were necessary to work with consultants, build a corpus of recorded texts, and analyze the language. On all my field trips, I was accompanied by my husband. The first trip to Papua New Guinea took place in September 2006 and lasted one month. The objectives were to obtain a research visa from the National Research Institute to pursue my research project in the East-Sepik province, and to establish links with the community of Tongwinjamb to enable us to return for a longer period after being granted a visa. One accesses the village by a 3-hour canoe ride from Ambunti, the district capital. The relationship with the Kwoma is negotiated through adoption into the kinship system, the denomination of a namesake in the clan, and above all, the promise to return and participate in the life of the clan, morally and financially. Given that our presence in the community was related to my work, it was negotiated that I would be the person receiving an endogamous-clan status rather than my husband. Thus, we became members of the community, particularly of the “bird of paradise” Kwoma clan.

We returned to Tongwinjamb in December 2007. This trip should have lasted nine months, but I was pregnant with my first child, so we only stayed five months. This second stay materialized our promise to return, and allowed me to put in place the language documentation project for which I was engaged. The documentation of the Kwoma language involved collecting a maximum of oral and cultural data. Participants were asked to speak in their native language. Most of the time, speakers told traditional stories from the village. In other occasions, they narrated procedural stories (how to hunt crocodiles, how to catch fishes with a traditional fishing net, how to weave a traditional string bag, etc). I collected more than ten hours of audio and about one hour of audio-video recorded data. I also proceeded to the recording of conversations, and comparative elicited data with the help of image books or videos. The entire corpus was transcribed and translated in Tok Pisin, the national lingua franca, with the help of Kwoma speakers, and a large part has been fully analyzed. Many of the participants asked me to take their photo to associate it with the story they recounted. These photographs are only for community materials and will never be part of any publications. We went back in the field in 2008, for five weeks in Tongwinjamb and for two weeks in

Ambunti, this time accompanied by our son, who was 18 months old. The aim of this last field trip was to revise the texts collected during previous trips and do some useful elicitations to get more subtle linguistic information. While in Ambunti, I could enter the recorded data on my computer. I was also able to do more fieldwork as many Kwoma speakers from Tongwinjamb were in Ambunti, and I could solicit information about problematic facts of the grammar.

Members of our clan in the village gave us maximum access to traditional and cultural events. They were aware that when speakers lose ways to talk about material culture they also lose knowledge regarding those materials. This holds true for rituals and other culturally specific celebrations that cannot be performed with the accompanying ritualistic language (see discussions in Harrison, 2007). However, my being a woman presented a major problem. A large part of ritual material is only available to ceremonially-informed men, as I explained above. It was thus impossible for me, as a clan-endogamous female, to record these data. One could be tempted to simply not record it. However, this material contains information that would add greatly to linguistic and anthropological research on the Kwoma and other analogous Sepik people. In the next section, I describe two solutions to access and preserve ritual and ceremonial data that were negotiated with the community.

Solutions

Collaboration with a male assistant

Foley (1991:132) reports that cultural restrictions against male and female interactions in New Guinea made it difficult for a male fieldworker to collect data from women. In this case, a second person, a female native speaker, helped the fieldworker overcome this barrier. In my interactions with the Kwoma, the gender restrictions were the opposite.

I was lucky to have my husband with me in the field to act as an assistant and access the data. My husband took charge of the recording of ritualistic songs and narratives, and saved me from being in contact with material prohibited to women. However, my husband is not a linguist. After several months in the field together, he was nevertheless able to acquire basic skills in linguistics, enough to transcribe and translate the Kwoma data. The resulting output is the minimum necessary for sustaining Kwoma knowledge about their sacred language and culture. These records can then be archived, and further linguistic analyses by a male linguist can be undertaken in the future. This still raises the problem of access to this material by the general public.

Metadata

Once the sensitive material is archived, one solution to limit their access to the right people is to accompany each text with “thick” metadata, including greater

contextual and ethnographic information (Johnson, 2004; Nathan, 2006; Innes 2010).

Metadata and data architecture allow firstly to access documentation and secondly to extract the relevant information. Metadata are data about data, that is to say, they constitute structured information about the records, files, content, etc. There are already standards for metadata format. Austin (2006: 93-94) adds that the metadata associated with records serve different functions, such as cataloging, describing, structuring, and other technical and administrative functions required for archiving. They allow links to be built between records, and ultimately to query and access the data.

Ethnographic comments as metadata are important for archiving records related to Kwoma rituals and ceremonies in that they inform about who can and who cannot access these data. Documenting this information allows better managing of data accessibility, in order to prevent them from being viewed by forbidden persons, such as non-Kwoma, members of other clans, and women.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed ethical issues that I encountered while doing fieldwork in Papua New Guinea to document Kwoma, an endangered language of the East-Sepik province. The Kwoma observe a series of three rituals associated with the harvesting of yam. Songs and narrations performed during these ceremonies are of restricted access for some people, among them me as a clan-endogamous woman. I explained here two solutions that were negotiated with the speech community to reconcile this conflicting issue, namely working with a male assistant to access the sacred data, and, archiving with ethnographic metadata documenting their content and accessibility. As such, I propose an effective way to meet the expectations of the community, while remaining respectful of its cultural beliefs.

Acknowledgements

All fieldwork for this research was funded by a postdoctoral fellowship from La Trobe University (2006-2009). I wish to express my gratitude to the people of Tongwinjamb and especially my clan family for their hospitality and generosity.

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